

Proper 21



Pentecost 19 September 29, 2002

Prayer of the Day

God of love, you know our frailties and failings. Give us your grace to overcome them; keep us from those things that harm us; and guide us in the way of salvation; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

{1} The word of the LORD came to me: {2} 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"? {3} As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. {4} 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.... {25} Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? {26} When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. {27} Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. {28} Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. {29} Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? {30} Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. {31} Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? {32} For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

2. *this proverb*: Hebrew, *mashal*. A saying, a quotation, a wisdom saying, an oracle, a proverb, even a parable.

The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge: The people of Israel are repeating this proverb, saying that they are being punished for sins their ancestors committed. This is based on Exodus 20:5 (other versions of the saying: Exodus 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9, Lamentations 5:7). In Psalm 106:6 the psalmist says, "Both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly." For the proverb see also Jeremiah 31:29.

4. *it is only the person who sins that shall die*: Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel reject the idea that the children are punished for the sins of their parents. "...all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge" (Jeremiah 31:30). But even in 32:18 Jeremiah says that Yahweh repays "the guilt of parents into the laps of their children after them," which certainly includes the idea that a later generations pays for the sins of a former generation. Two Sundays ago the Psalm (103:8) quoted the first part of Yahweh's self-identification, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

25, 29: The people claim that Yahweh's ways are unfair when he punishes them for the sins of their parents. But Yahweh denies their accusation and turns it back on them. They are the ones who are unfair.

26-28: Those who sin will be punished, while those who do what is right will live.

30-32: Yahweh will judge the people according to their actions, so they should "turn," repent and

live.

31. a new heart and a new spirit: Ezekiel 36:24-27 is a prophecy of what Yahweh will do: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (verse 26)."

Psalm 25:1-9

{1} To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. {2} O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. {3} Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. {4} Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. {5} Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. {6} Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. {7} Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! {8} Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. {9} He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

The song is an alphabetic acrostic. Each verse begins a different letter of the alphabet in order. The singer praises Yahweh for mercy and patience and steadfast love. (S)he asks that the Lord will lead, instruct, teach. In context with the first lesson the singer acknowledges his/her sins and prays that the Lord will remember the singer "for your goodness' sake" and be merciful.

Philippians 2:1-13

{1} If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, {2} make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. {3} Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. {4} Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. {5} Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, {6} who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, {7} but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, {8} he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. {9} Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, {10} so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, {11} and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {12} Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; {13} for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

1-4: Paul calls on the Christians in Philippi to be united in their common service of Christ. They are to be indwelt by the mind that was in Christ. Further, they are to "regard others as better than yourselves," and "look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." This may refer to proclaiming Christ out of selfish ambition, 1:17.

5-11: The *Carmen Christi*. The mind that is supposed to indwell the Christians in Philippi is the mind described in this song, a mind of humility and obedience and self-denial. For a detailed examination of the song, and its interpretation, see R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*. Cambridge: University Press, 1967.

6. he was in the form of God: Greek *morphe*, "form" implies that Jesus had the essential attributes of God. There are similar expressions in 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3.

something to be exploited: Literally, "did not regard it as a prize," a treasure to be held on to at all costs, like the treasure in the field in Matthew 13:44. The phrase means protecting something one has, while the translation "exploited" suggests the use of a possession for an inappropriate benefit. The point is not that Jesus misused his deity for selfish ends, but that instead of insisting on his divine prerogatives he "emptied himself."

7. emptied himself: Greek *kenosis*, to make empty. Russian Christianity has emphasized this "kenotic" doctrine of the Incarnation. G. P. Fedotov writes, "The ideal of the literal imitation of Christ in his poverty and humiliation on earth is an apprehension of religious genius which was to

mold permanently the mentality of the Russian people...." [1]

being born in human likeness: In Genesis 1:26 God created humanity in his image and *likeness*.

found in human form: Greek *skemati*, "form," external shape and appearance, rather than nature.

9. *the name that is above every name*: A reference to the "name" of God, as in Exodus 3:15. The "name" is the tetragrammaton, [YHWH]. This name is translated in the Septuagint with the Greek word, [*kurios*, Lord]. In verse 11 every tongue is to confess Jesus Christ is *Lord*.

12-13: Paul encourages the Philippians to obey him in this matter. In 4:2 he specifically encourages Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind which suggests that they are in conflict and threaten the unity of the community.

Matthew 21:23-32

{23} 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?" {24} 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. {25} 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?' {26} But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." {27} 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. {28} "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' {29} He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. {30} The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. {31} 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. {32} 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.

23-24. *the chief priests and the elders of the people*: In verse 45 Jesus is in controversy with "the chief priests and the Pharisees."

By what authority are you doing these things: In the previous chapter, verses 12-16 Jesus cleansed the Temple and healed the blind and lame. The priests and elder challenge his authority to do these things. Jesus response is to return the challenge.

25-26: Jesus' question has to do with the authority of John the Baptist, was it "from heaven, or was it of human origin." The Jewish authorities evaluate their possible answers and find problems with them.

27: They tell Jesus they do not know, and Jesus refuses to answer the question about his authority.

28-31a: Jesus tells a story about two sons who say one thing and do another. He asks which did the will of his father. The authorities say that the one who said no, but did what he was asked is the one who did the father's will.

31b-32: The authorities did not accept God's will on John's authority, and did not change their minds when they saw his effect on sinners. Therefore, they are like the second son. Jesus likens them to "the tax collectors and the prostitutes," epitomes of willful disobedience of God's will.

Reflection

The principle involved in the readings is that actions speak louder than words. You will be judged, not by what you say, but by what you do. You will not be able to blame others for your faults. Nor will you escape punishment if you ignore the truth when you hear it. God is merciful and will not remember our transgressions and sins, and he expects us to learn from our mistakes and from his instruction. Among the qualities that God desires is willingness to sacrifice our own wishes for the sake of obedience. If we refuse to obey, and then have second thoughts, God will be merciful.

Ezekiel and Jeremiah take issue with the Mosaic principle that guilt passes from generation to generation. In the social structure of Israel that was an expression of the unity of the people across generations. Honor as well as guilt was handed down from generation to generation. If

punishment across generational lines is unfair, then so also is trans-generational honor. The righteous son who renounces the wickedness of his father will live, while the sinful son of a righteous father will be punished (Ezekiel 18:5ff.).

In Philippians 2:4 we are admonished, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." While guilt and honor do not pass from one generation to another, Jesus made atonement for our sins, and we are to seek to do the same for others. In 1 Corinthians 7:14 husband or wife are made holy by the righteousness of the spouse. In 2 Timothy 2:10 Paul says that he endures everything for the sake of the elect.

"The requirement for entering the kingdom of heaven has been defined by Jesus as 'to do the will of my Father who is in heaven' (7:21); it is not met by professions of obedience which are not matched by actions. "There are difficulties in the parable in this context. The chief priests and elders would be astonished to have it suggested that they were not working in the vineyard of God as they had promised. It is hardly likely that the chief priests and elders of the people, *en masse*, were accused of failing to carry out their duties to God. There is no indication of how they were failing in obedience.... The taxes were still collected, and no doubt there was no great scarcity of harlots in Jerusalem and through the country as a result of the mission of John." [2] Though the religious authorities want to arrest Jesus (verse 45), the common people believe that he is a prophet (verses 26 and 45).

Hymns [3]

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

377 E--Lift High the

492 D--O Master, Let

419 II--Lord of All

179 II--At the Name

423 II--Lord, Whose Love

156 II--Look, the Sight

661v II--My Song Is Love

643v II--Once in Royal (730s)

754s, 490, 514, 537, 723v

Prayers of the People [4]

P or A: Straining forward to what lies ahead, we bring our intercessions and thanksgivings to God saying, "God, hear us," and responding, "Let our prayer come to you."

A: Teach us, your church, to know what it means to count all things as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. May our pastors, bishops, and lay leaders model this attitude and way of being. God, hear us. Let our prayer come to you.

A: Your law is the basis of all human society. Show the observance of your law as the gateway to your grace and to true human community for all nations and peoples. God, hear us. Let our prayer come to you.

A: Make us dependable tenants in your vineyard, taking our tasks seriously and wishing to serve well the one who has placed us here. Be gracious to us in our failings and sins. Let your law guide us and drive us to Christ for forgiveness and grace. God, hear us. Let our prayer come to you.

A: Look to the needs of your most weak and vulnerable ones, O compassionate One. We have been asked to pray for _____. Help us to share in your work of mercy and healing and let us know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his suffering. God, hear us. Let our prayer come to you.

P: We give thanks for your law and for the grace that has come to us in your living Word, Jesus Christ. Hear our prayers for those in need and grant us your salvation, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Or [5]

Presider or deacon

Giving glory to God our Father through Jesus Christ our Lord, in the company of the holy angels, let us pray for all the concerns of the world.

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 candidates for public office and for mercy, justice, and peace among all peoples.

For abundant fruits of the earth and for this good and bountiful world. For our city and those who live in it and for our families, companions, and all those we love.

For all those in desperate need: the sick and the suffering, prisoners, captives, and their families, the hungry, homeless, and oppressed.

For those who rest in Christ and for all the dead.

For pardon for all our transgressions. Lifting our voices with all creation, with the blessed Virgin Mary Michael and all the angels, and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

Presider

God, who calls on us to do your will in the vineyards of this world, hear the prayers we offer this day and receive all peoples into your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Notes

[1] Quoted in F. W. Beare, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959, p. 82.

[2] Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew: Translation, Introduction and Commentary*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, p. 424.

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

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

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