

# Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

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The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

October 1, 2017

“Why Will You Die?”

Text: Ezekiel 18:25

“Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?”

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).

Nails on a chalkboard.

A shovel on concrete.

A scratch on glass.

A metal fork on a plate.

The sound of other people chewing.

Biting on a Popsicle stick.

Teeth clicking against a spoon.

Kids crying.

Cotton balls.

Styrofoam.

A micro fiber cloth.

Peach skin.

Green bananas.

They grate you. They grate your teeth. They set your teeth on edge. For the moment, at least, you want to die!

And it isn't just *sounds* - the things that irritate us, that

annoy us, that make us cringe. The things we find intolerably irritating or unpleasant. Like the idea that it's the *fathers* who have eaten the sour grapes, but it's the *children's* teeth that are set on edge.

Come again?

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

“Set on edge.” Literally, “blunted” - the edge of them turned. Practically, “to cause an unpleasant tingling of the teeth.”

Those *two* are why we sometimes similarly say, “grates your teeth.” “Sets my teeth on edge” just to *think* about it! It's a reference to that shuddering feeling you get when something grates, when in rubbing against something else it makes a harsh and unpleasant noise. It “grates” - it gnashes, it grinds, it grits - those pearly whites of yours.

So back to what could cause a reaction like that, back to our Old Testament lesson. In *general*, it's the inevitable effect on your teeth that results whenever *sour* - that is, not yet *ripe* - grapes are eaten. And not to get off track, but you can sure call it “sour grapes,” all right, can't you, for *in particular* here, it's that someone other than the *eater* of grapes is the one whose teeth are so affected. Again, in particular, to be very specific about those two “someones,” that is, well, for *once*, for understanding, I could recommend the New Living Translation here:

"Why do you quote this proverb concerning the land of Israel: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children's mouths pucker at the taste'?"

The parents, and the children. The *parents* do the *eating*, and the *children* have to suffer with the whole irritating “teeth-thing.”

"The fathers have sinned, and the children are smitten," the Targum, that verbal explanation/interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, explains it.

You know “the beef,” “Clara”: it’s what happens when someone gets punished for what someone *else* has done! Only *this* “Clara” lived 2,581 years before Wendy’s started questioning the relative meat in other people’s (“Home of the Big Bun” - e.g. competitors Burger King and McDonald’s) hamburgers (597 B. C. - 1984 A. D.).

Ezekiel was in Babylon. And all his countrymen - at least all the *important* ones - were *with* him.

They weren’t “on holiday,” as the Brits say. They weren’t on vacation. There were in exile. They had been carried off against their will. The whole country (Judah) had been overrun. Their flagship city (Jerusalem) had been destroyed. By King Nebuchadnezzar, and the invading Babylonian army. And the Israelites weren’t happy!

“Join the party,” right? “That makes *two* of them,” right? For the LORD wasn’t happy either; that’s how they got there in the first place. When Babylon first reared its menacing head, Judah - and Jehoiachin, its king - had turned not to its *God* but to its *neighbor*, to *Egypt*.

Bad move. (It) got them punished. It got them exiled. It got them to Babylon - forced, conscripted, taken against their will.

It got them to thinking. It got them to complaining. It got them to grumbling, “We didn’t do anything to deserve this. . . This is *their* fault, not *ours*!”

“It isn’t fair!” they argued, like children *always* argue.

They complained so often that their complaint became a regular “proverb,” a saying among them, a “truth” - at least from *their* perspective:

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

Did they go so far as to think the LORD Himself might be on their side? Did they have such chutzpah that they actually whipped out His own words against Him?

Exodus, chapter 20, right?

Oh, not one of the Ten Commandments, but it’s right in there *with* them, interestingly enough. It’s under the very first one, in fact - under the “discussion” of “*carved images*,” and the “*likenesses of anything that is in heaven above, or . . . the earth beneath, or . . . the water under the earth*”:

“*You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for 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, . . .*” (Ex. 20:5).

“See *there!*” all the “children” shout! “I *told* you!”

Only it’s not *there*, is it? What they’re trying to say, I mean. Their convenient little “proverb.”

Oh there’s the “*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation*,” all right. But there’s nothing about the children being punished *unfairly*. There’s nothing about the children being *innocent*.

Just the *opposite*, right? The “*children*” are carrying on the same “*carrying-on*” - the same *sin* - as their “*fathers*”! Children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren!

“*To the third and the fourth generation . . . the children*” are continuing in “*the iniquity of the fathers*.” They’re just as guilty as those who went before. Like their “*fathers*,” they, too, “*hate*” Him. They ignore His will. They criticize His ways.

“Oh, don’t you *dare* quote that Scripture against me!” I can just hear the LORD react to His crying children. “Yes, don’t you even *dare!* I don’t want to *hear* it!”

/ So okay, but again, this whole notion of one group or one person punished for another’s sin, still, where in the world would they ever have gotten a crazy idea like *that*?

What’s that, you say?

Perhaps from “The Garden”? Maybe from our first parents, Adam and Eve? Maybe - just maybe, perhaps - from the first sin to enter this heretofore perfect little world of ours (so, e. g., the *Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary*).

Could you be right? Could it be that Adam and Eve's sin, thereafter visited on all those who subsequently would be born to them as children - could have been the seed of such a proverb?

And could those subsequent words from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, only added fuel to their "creative" fire: "*Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities*" (Lam. 5:7)?

Who's to say at this point, of course; but we certainly *can* say that that first sin corrupted our human nature, and that ever since it has been a universal mark of corrupt nature that we sinful human beings attempt to lay the blame which is rightfully ours on anyone or anything else we can possibly find. Ironically, of course, we learned *that* one from our first parents, didn't we - Adam immediately blaming Eve, and Eve, in turn, pointing the finger of responsibility at the serpent?

And I think we can also say, well, nice try, but we're talking about *actual* sin here, as either of our brilliant confirmands can readily tell you, not *original*!

And the LORD, as I said, is willing to have the conversation about punishing sin. He's *more than willing* to have the conversation! But the folks down at "*lectionary central*," however, *that's* another story.

You know those folks. You've heard me talk about them before. They're the ones who set out our lessons each week like your mother used to set out your Sunday go-to-church clothes. They pick our pericopes - the three lessons that are "cut out" (literally) from Scripture each week of the Church Year. They determine what we're going to "wear" - or not wear! - from God's Holy Word each and every Sunday.

And *this* week, they determined that we weren't going to wear two dozen verses from God's great prophet Ezekiel. Verses 5-24. They're missing. They're left out.

/ They're important.

I say, they're *important*.

I say, *I'm* putting them back *in*.

They come right after all that "*sour grapes*" and "*teeth . . . set on edge*" stuff. I said I could *almost* hear the LORD tell His crying children He didn't want to hear them try to use that "to the third and fourth generation" passage against Him. Well, we can *all* hear Him tell His Israel He doesn't want to hear that crazy proverb of theirs anymore!

Yes, oh my, you want to talk *teeth being set on edge*? Let's talk about the *Lord's* teeth? That one - that pithy little proverb of theirs, that pitiful little proverb of theirs - was on His list. It was up there above either nails on a chalkboard or micro fiber cloths. It was so irritating to Him that just outright banned it! Disallowed it. Outlawed it. Forbade that it ever be spoken again . . . in all the land of Israel (and all of Babylon, where the people in exile were complaining).

3 *As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb [The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge] shall no more be used by you in Israel.*

And when He had calmed down just a bit, He started in with a blanket statement: "*Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die*" (v. 4).

But there were more covers on that "bed," as I said, than just that one thin "blanket." Twenty-four more layers of warmth. Twenty-four more verses.

Verses in which the Lord expands on what we heard from Him last week about "*his ways*," and "*our ways*." Verses in which He distinguishes the two. Verses in which He decimates that unfortunate proverb of his people - and the self-serving theology that goes *with* it:

5 "*If a man is righteous and does what is just and right . . . 10 he shall surely live, declares the Lord God.*"

But 10 "*If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these [wicked] things (11 (though he himself did none of these things), . . . 13 . . . He [the latter, the son] shall not live. He has done all these abominations; he shall surely*

die; his blood shall be upon himself.”

And as for that “third generation,” the LORD continues, 14 “Now suppose this [!] man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not [!] do likewise: . . . he shall surely live” [while] 18 his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.”

Then it’s one more time with that summary statement, that it’s every man (and woman and child) for himself in this punishment-for-sin thing:

20 *The soul who sins shall die.*

To be precise, so that there can be no confusion about this troubling point:

“The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (20).

21 . . . “If a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed . . . he shall surely live; he shall not die.” But by the same token, on the other side of the coin, 24 . . . “when a righteous person turns away from his righteousness . . . None of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die.”

Every man for himself, right? And yet Israel was not happy. And yet Israel continued to complain, and we’re back to our lesson: .

. . . 25 “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?”

We shouldn’t be too quick to judge. For we, too, “complain” about some of those to whom the LORD extends His grace - you know, those “Pharisees,” and “tax collectors,” and “sinners.” We complain about - as we saw last week - all that “eleventh-hour” stuff, all those “deathbed conversions,” We charge that “it’s not fair” that “some never had a chance,” that “they were doomed from the start,” that “there was no way they were ever going to break out of that cycle, or circumstance, or situation.”

“Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh,” the LORD reminds us - Israel, Judah, “exiled” in the Babylon of this 21<sup>st</sup>-century world.

“The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (20).

Therefore,

30 . . . *Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make your-selves a new heart and a new spirit!*

*Why will you die, O house of Israel?*

It won’t be because of anything anyone else has done.

And it won’t be because you never had a chance.

And it sure won’t be because the LORD wanted it that way.

*Why will you die?* Honestly, you’ve really got to want it! Want to die, that is. You’ve got to will it; for you sure don’t have to! God is calling you to turn from it. His will is that you - no matter who you are, no matter what you have done - turn from your sin . . . and live, and not die! He takes no pleasure in your death. He takes joy in your life.

*Why will you die? You will die for your sin - your sins - wanted sin - back at you!* who doesn’t find something else to do with it, somewhere else to put it, that is. For that sin that is “on you,” as either of our confirmands can tell you, or it’s “on Him” - on that one and only Son of God, who live and died for you, that His righteousness might be your righteousness, His life your life.

Christianity, dear friends, is not a religion. It’s a relationship. It’s a relationship with your Lord and God, from whom you separated yourself by your sin - your own sin; of thought, word and deed - but who has redeemed you - bought you back - with the precious blood of His Son Jesus Christ. It’s a relationship in which, though we daily sin much, well, this is what Isaiah says after that whole “my thoughts, your thoughts” thing: *“Isa 55:7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”* Thanks be to God. Amen.