

Message for September 27, 2026

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“The Son Who Changed His Mind and Went”

This week on campus was the first midterm exam for my class of first-year chemical engineering students. Early performance grades are due in a few days. The grades in my class are a combination of averages, split between different kinds of assignments. One part of the students' final grades is the average of their exam scores; another part of their grade is the average of the points they get on homework. In the grade calculation, there are also dropped grades, built-in excused assignments for times when things get in the way of doing schoolwork. This kind of grading system is familiar to most students. The students appreciate that the rating of their performance is designed to capture their work over the whole semester. This puts less pressure on their performance on any one day or on any one type of assignment. If students do well in the beginning of the semester, they can relax more at the end. If the start of the semester is rough, the students have time to make up some ground. If the students struggle with taking exams, their grades on homework and projects can help.

If we were to assign grades for our lives, I expect that we would want to use a similar system of averages. We could build in some free passes for especially rough weeks and some “cheat days” when we can forgo on our usual discipline. Our goal would be to be good enough in most areas of our lives most of the time. In the time of Ezekiel and in the time of Jesus, such a grading system sounded reasonable to the exiled children of Israel and to the religious leaders as well. They wanted to get by on something that is good enough most of the time. As we learned from our readings, however, this is not the grading system that God uses. One of my goals for this sermon is to use the examples from Ezekiel and Matthew to show how God's grading system is so much more demanding than a satisfactory average—and so much better for us because of God's grace.

As many of you know, I grew up as the child of a pastor. Like most kids, there were occasions when my siblings and I argued with our parents, claiming that some decision or some consequence was not fair. We thought that we had done enough to deserve whatever it was that we wanted (or, alternatively, that a sibling had not done enough to get what he

or she wanted). My siblings and I quickly learned that “not fair” was a combination of words that you did not want to use in an argument with my father. Other kids complain that they get a sermon or lecture from their parents. In our case, a “sermon” was not a figure of speech. A “sermon” on fairness was quite literal, with different versions for different occasions, abundant Biblical quotations, and even footnotes about the meaning of the root words in Hebrew or Greek. And sermons on fairness from my dad were not short. No matter how the argument was going, you did not want to trigger a sermon on fairness.

In our reading from Ezekiel, the children of Israel had been commiserating with each other about the unfairness of their captivity by the Babylonians. God had noticed and sent Ezekiel with a message for them, his own version of a sermon on fairness.

A little context about Ezekiel is needed here. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in the 8th century, the Babylonians took over the region that included Judah. Jehoiakim, the 3rd to last king of Judah, rebelled against Babylon. In retaliation for that rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured and deported many leaders and much of the young talent in Judah away to Babylon. Among the young people taken are some names that you will recognize: Daniel, Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego. From chapter 1 of the book of Ezekiel, we learn that Ezekiel was taken in the second deportation a few years later while he was training to be a priest in Jerusalem. Now, at 30 years old, he is an exile in an agricultural region along one of the rivers near Babylon. Jerusalem is still standing when Ezekiel starts writing but that will not last much longer.

The book of Ezekiel is one of the major (or longer) books of prophecy in the Old Testament. It is one of the most specific books in terms of dates and events. Ezekiel includes messages that warn about the fall of Jerusalem, the consequences for the other nations that had oppressed Israel and Judah, and the return of the children of Israel as a nation to the Promised land. The book of Ezekiel is not often quoted or preached about in the lectionary as the book is not easy to read. Like the book of Daniel in the Old Testament or the book of Revelation in the New Testament, Ezekiel is full of imagery and symbolism. Ezekiel the person was also not a prophet of gentle words, and much of the writing is quite harsh. For most Christians, the most recognizable portion of the book of Ezekiel is from Chapter 37,

when Ezekiel describes the vision God gave him of a valley of dry bones being brought back to life at God's command.

In our reading from Ezekiel Chapter 18, the prophet quotes a proverb that sounds strange to our ears: "the parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are on edge." I tried to think of situations where my teeth have been on edge. None came to mind until I remembered the lessons about hops that we teach in the brewing classes. Hops, the flower of the *Humulus lupulus* plant, are added to beer during the boil step of the brewing process to extract compounds that give the beer its bitter flavor and prevent the growth of certain bacteria. In the lab, we show students what hops look like, both the whole hop cones and the pelletized hops. We demonstrate how to rub and smell the hops to get an idea about the aromas that will be present in the finished. Inevitably, every year, a student will ask about tasting the hops. Since nothing is a better teacher than experience, we warn the students that the taste is unpleasant then let them try. Students pop hop pellets into their mouths and slowly begin to chew. A second or two of time passes with looks of curiosity and concentration that quickly turn into shudders and gasps as the intense bitterness sensory information reaches the students' brains. There is then sputtering, spitting, searching for water to rinse out their mouths, and a whole range of facial expressions that might suitably capture what is meant by "the children's teeth are on edge".

The paraphrase of this proverb in *The Message* translation reads as a question, "The parents ate green apples, and the children got the stomachache?" In essence, the children are complaining that they are suffering the consequences of their parents' choices. The parents have eaten something very sour or bitter, but the children are the ones who experience the bad taste or indigestion. The Israelites in exile liked to quote this proverb to each other because they felt that their situation was the result of their ancestors' bad choices. You can imagine the bitterness and angst in their voices as they talk. This is the sentiment that God is responding to when he sends Ezekiel to talk to the elders about fairness.

Our reading does not cover Ezekiel's whole sermon on fairness. In between the two sections of Chapter 18 that we read is an object lesson that could be called the Parable of the Son and the Grandson. The story starts with a description of a righteous man from God's perspective. *The Message* translation puts verses 5-9 this way:

Imagine a person who lives well, treating others fairly and keeping good relationships—
[this person] doesn't eat at the pagan shrines, doesn't worship the idols so popular in Israel, doesn't seduce a neighbor's spouse, doesn't indulge in casual sex, doesn't bully anyone, doesn't pile up bad debts, doesn't steal, doesn't refuse food to the hungry, doesn't refuse clothing to the ill-clad, doesn't exploit the poor, doesn't live by impulse and greed, doesn't treat one person better than another, but lives by my statutes and faithfully honors and obeys my laws. This person who lives upright and well shall live a full and true life.

Verses 10-13 go on to describe the son of that man, who does the exact opposite of what his righteous father had done. Ezekiel then asks his listeners if this son will live, suggesting that the son may expect that his father's build-up of good works will carry over to him. Ezekiel makes it clear that this is not the case. The son will answer for his own actions; he will not get away with disobeying God and mistreating people.

In verses 14-17, the unrighteous son of the righteous man has a son of his own. This grandson sees the actions of his father and, despite the bad examples he has witnessed, chooses to do what is right. Like his grandfather, the grandson is faithful to God. He shows love to his neighbors and follows God's path. Ezekiel rhetorically asks his listeners if this grandson should die because of his father's actions, i.e., should the grandson "have his teeth set on edge because his father ate sour grapes"? Ezekiel again makes it clear that this is not the case, in verses 18-20:

This [grandson] will not die for the sins of the parent; he will live truly and well. But the parent will die for what the parent did, for the sins of oppressing the weak, robbing brothers and sisters, doing what is dead wrong in the community.

Do you need to ask, 'So why does the child not share the guilt of the parent?'

Isn't it plain? It's because the child did what is fair and right. Since the child was careful to do what is lawful and right, the child will live truly and well. The soul that sins is the soul that dies. The child does not share the guilt of the parent, nor the parent the guilt of the child.

Why does Ezekiel need to tell this story? The elders of Israel in exile had probably been arguing with Ezekiel about fairness, using passages about the first commandment from Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. For example, Deuteronomy 5:8-9:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in 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, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation...

“See”, the elders would say, “God punishes children for the iniquity of their parents.” Ezekiel needed to remind the elders that the passages about “iniquity of the parents” have additional information. For example, if one continues reading, Deuteronomy 9-10 are this:

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The punishing consequences were not the fault of just one disobedient generation. God was talking about cases when generation after generation did not learn from the mistakes of the previous generation. Like the grandson in the story, each new generation makes their own choices about how they worship God and how they treat their neighbors. Through Ezekiel, God is pleading with His people to reconsider their actions (verses 30-32):

Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!

Do these words from Ezekiel sound familiar? We hear similar words in the New Testament from John of the Baptist (Matthew 3):

Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near!

Produce fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Here is where we turn to our reading from Matthew 18, where Jesus is talking with the chief priests and elders in the temple about John's message. John the Baptist had made a substantial impact in the region around Jerusalem. Large crowds had heard John's teachings and watched as sinners had come forward for a baptism of repentance. I can imagine the discomfort on the elders' faces when Jesus responded to their public questioning of his authority with a public questioning about their reaction to John's preaching and baptizing. The priests and elders were happy to talk at length about nearly any topic of Jewish religious observance...just not about that. John's messages of repentance, and the powerful responses to that message, were too pointed and too close to home. And now Jesus, whom John had announced to the crowds as "the Lamb of God," was in the temple, on the priests' and elders' own turf. Even more troubling to the priests and elders: the people were listening to Jesus.

It was into this context that Jesus tells the Parable of the Two Sons, a parable that Ezekiel probably would have admired. The priests and elders can clearly see themselves in the parable as the second son. They say all the right things in God's presence ("I will, sir"), and put on the appearance of faithfully following God, but then they continue worshipping God without their hearts and not loving their neighbors. The priests and elders want the credit for their polite and obedient words; they want that to be good enough for a passing grade without needing to really change.

In Jesus' comparison, the people that the priests and elders usually denigrate as "sinners" are the first son, the son who begins in a rebellious and disobedient fashion. The tax collectors and prostitutes that went to hear John the Baptist's message had indeed started in the wrong direction, saying "I will not" to God's face and to God's commandments. They had turned away from society and, in the process, given up on a relationship with the God whom that society worshipped.

In the parable, Jesus does not explain why the first son initially refused to go work in the vineyard. This got me thinking. Perhaps the first son had been criticized for previous mistakes in vineyard work and felt discouraged about trying again. Perhaps the first son had many unmet obligations elsewhere and spending time in the vineyard that day meant more delays in catching up. Perhaps the second son had been needling and harassing the first son all morning until the first son finally lost his temper—just in time for the father to ask about working in the vineyard. I can even imagine the second son smirking at the first son behind the father's back right after delivering his "I will, sir" and getting an approving look from their father. Whatever the circumstances, I find myself aligning more with the first son as I get older. Life experiences have taught me that I do not respond well to being told what to do, especially when I have been harried by setbacks or when the ask carries the risk of failure. Now, when I hear the first son's "I will not," I hear more than rebellion; I hear the difficult circumstances that make life and relationships complicated.

Jesus' parable also does not explain why the first son changed his mind. Perhaps Jesus knew that his listeners had faced enough decisions and regret in their own lives to fill in the blanks. I can envision the first son, after the conversation with his father, taking time away from the noise, the rush, and the emotion to reflect. Eventually, the first son calmed enough to see the father's request to work in the vineyard as an invitation instead of just another demand. The request embodied an invitation to try again, to trust that the father understood the son's obligations and limitations, and to participate in the family business. The request showed that the father had not given up on the first son. The father could have left the son to his own devices for the day. Instead, the father sought out the first son and asked him to go, maybe even knowing ahead of time that the son might refuse but wanting to present the invitation anyway.

From this perspective, we should not be surprised about how the tax collectors and prostitutes had responded to John's message about repentance. Through John, they heard God seeking them out and asking them to work in the vineyard, long after society, and the priests and elders, had stopped asking. They heard that they still had a choice; they still had an opportunity to follow God's commandments. And they were not about to miss the opportunity, maybe their last opportunity, to change their minds and go.

As we heard last week in the story of Jonah and the parable of the workers in the vineyard, and as we heard in our readings for this week, God's fairness is not the same as human fairness. God's fairness demands so much more than we would like to get a passing grade. We would like to coast a pedigree of past good behavior or to offer polite words and religious observances without actually doing what God has asked. If we were to stand on our own, not one of us, priest or elder, tax collector or prostitute, could live up to God's expectations. We would all be in a lot of trouble if God truly treated us "fairly".

Thankfully, God had a much better plan for fairness than the human options. Rather than lower His standards of justice, God offered us a substitute in His son, Jesus. Throughout his life, Jesus did all the right things to love and serve God and neighbor. Jesus' perfect performance during life, and his willingness to take on our punishment through his death on the cross, means that God's justice has been satisfied. God can now extend to us the "steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments". We did not love God and keep His commandments, but since Jesus did in our place. Through this grace and our faith in Jesus, we receive the blessings that God has promised.

As in the parable of the two sons, God calls us to work in His vineyard, to love and serve Him and our neighbors. Like with the first son, there have been, and will continue to be, times when we rebel and refuse to go. There also have been and will be times when we act like the second son, trying to get away with a polite response and no real change. For all these times, we need to remember the words of Ezekiel and the words of John the Baptist: there is opportunity for repentance. We do not have to continue in the ways of our ancestors' bad examples. We do not have to continue in the ways of our previous bad choices. Jesus' death and resurrection have freed us from that. Instead, with God's word to guide us and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we too can change our minds and go. Thanks be to God!
Amen.