

As I was reading Ezekiel, I was thinking “it’s so easy, right?” Just do the right thing. Yet so often it seems that doing the right thing is the hardest thing to do. Relationships are complicated and doing what is right may cause division or rejection. It may require a change of relationship or a change of direction which can be painful. Matt Skinner says God’s judgment is not about moral rectitude but rather about not neglecting the weaker of us in society. It is not an individual moral improvement plan but about the type of society God wants for us. That makes it hard because we all have inner struggles with things like greed, fear, insecurity. Navigating those things in our relationships within ourselves and with each other can be difficult which makes creating the society God wants for us challenging.

When I was 11, I moved to a new school and I was determined to make friends. When I arrived there, I did start to make friends and yet I noticed another little girl who was an outcast. The kids would make fun of her and at first I joined in. Yet, I felt so guilty and I made a change of direction. I befriended her and started defending her. Of course, this meant that I became an outcast as well. That was painful. It’s possible that I could have done things differently and not have been completely alienated. Yet, it is possible that there was no other way I could have done it. Either way, doing the right thing was difficult. It meant taking a risk and possibly losing the fledgling friendships I had begun.

Sometimes harming our neighbor is embedded in the law. Martin Luther King Jr in his Letter from a Birmingham jail writes to white clergymen who were critical of his protests for civil rights . He said “YOU express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's

decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'An unjust law is no law at all.'"

There have been cases of arrests in Arizona for leaving water for migrants crossing the Arizona border. One example of this is the arrest of four women from the group *No More Deaths*, an organization run by the ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson. The women were arrested in 2017 according to the New York Times for entering the area without a permit, driving on a restricted-access road, and leaving food and water. They made the argument that they were following religious beliefs and finally in 2020 a judge found in their favor. Yet, for three years they were struggling through the court system for simply trying to love their neighbor.

Ezekiel is writing in a time of chaos in his community. The time period of these writings are from 593 - 571 BCE. Now remember that BCE is the opposite timeline of CE. So while CE's time goes up - 5,6,7,8, BCE's time goes down. So the timeline would be 8, 7, 6, 5. King Nebuchadnezzar II came to power in 605 BCE. That means that King Nebuchadnezzar came to power about 10 years before the time period Ezekiel is talking about.

Now around 597 or 598 BCE King Jehoyakim יהויָקִים , the Judean king at the time, rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar. As one can imagine, that did not play out as the Judeans would

have hoped. King Nebuchadnezzar sent envoys to take care of the situation and then came himself as Jerusalem surrendered. He put King Zedekiah on the throne in Judah and forced an oath of loyalty by the king. He took booty and transported important members of the community out of Judah. Then in 588 or 89 Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. At this point the Babylonians destroy Judah. They decimated several Judean cities, killed the leaders, took over Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and deported even more people out of Judah. It was a devastating time for God's people and Ezekiel was helping people make sense of what was going on through this chaos. It does not seem to be a time of easy answers. The right thing seemed to be by the Judean leaders to fight for independence and yet the outcome was destruction. How do we make sense of that? If God is on the side of the people, why would God allow this destruction to happen?

The reading from today is part of the section where Ezekiel is explaining why this happened and he sounds harsh. The end of the book gives hope. Yet this chapter 18 does give some hope. Ellen F Davis argues that where many prophets are arguing with kings or priests, Ezekiel is in "conversation with the tradition." In other words he is attempting to take out the stories and the beliefs that are either "useless" or damaging to peoples' understanding of God. This proverb "The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?" meaning that children will pay for the sins of the parents over a period of generations is something people are repeating. It is an idea that can be found in Exodus 20:5 and 6 "for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, **6** but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." Yet in Deuteronomy, which is a revision of the laws in Exodus, it says: "**16**

“Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death.” Ezekiel points to the idea in Deuteronomy that only the person who sins will be responsible for the sin. This belief that children will pay for the sins of the parents may have been leading people to complain about how unfair God is. Therefore, Ezekiel throws this out saying, God is not unfair because what you are saying is not who God is. Therefore, you are the ones who are responsible, not any who came before this. This can be both a relief and yet it can also be difficult. We alone are responsible for the consequences of our sin. There is no one else to blame.

It also still leaves us with the fact that righteousness is hard. And sometimes no matter how badly we may want to do the right thing, we may find that the right thing was not as right as we thought it was. We may think we are doing the right thing and end up harming others. We have all heard the phrase “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

Yet we know that we can turn to God to help us through fear of doing what is right or in times of confusion about what is right. The psalm for today is psalm 25 and in verses 4-5 it says **4** Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths.**5** Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long and verses 8 and 9 say “Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” We can trust that God will show us the right way.

And in Philippians Paul says “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Ezekiel says “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says

the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.” God loves us so much, She wants us to do what is right and will do what She can to guide us in the right direction. That does not mean we will always hear correctly. Yes, we will sometimes not hear or we will go in the direction we want to go rather than the direction She knows will be best for us. Yet we can trust that God will guide us back.

I replaced my car of 15 years with a new car that has all the modern technology. One of the safety features is that if I go a little too far over the middle line on the road the car will pull me back to where I am supposed to be. Thankfully this does not happen too often but one day when I was my mind was wandering a little bit, the car pulled me back because I was a little too far over. It was the weirdest feeling and a little bit scary. Yet when I realized what had happened it was a relief. The car was keeping me in line with where I was supposed to be. God is like that technology. We can count on Her to bring us back.

God does not want us to suffer and yet sometimes we do suffer when we do God’s work. Martin Luther King Jr ended up in jail for protesting. The four women in AZ had to deal with going to jail and navigating through the court system for 3 years. Choosing to do what is right may mean the loss of a friend or a job or a relationship. Yet, we know that God does not want pain and death for us. God will lead us to where we are meant to be and will be with us through any pain and suffering that comes with doing Her work. As Ezekiel says “Turn to God and live.” Joy Moore said on the podcast for Working Preacher that in Ezekiel the ways of God are witnessed by the world when they are embodied by Israel, when they embody the practices of justices and righteousness, which leads to life. God works through us to bring justice and righteousness into the world. She gives us strength and hope in any struggles that come when we do that work. We

will at points misunderstand and mishear but we can count on God bringing us back to where we need to be. As the Psalmist says: 8 Good and upright is the LORD; therefore She instructs sinners in the way.⁹ She leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble Her way. We can count on God to help us do her justice in the world. In Jesus name, Amen