

## ***“The Lord is Just”***

Parents tell a child to pick up the toys – and the cry goes out – “That’s not fair, I didn’t get them out!” A school district decides to build a new school, which means that taxes will go up – and the cry goes out from the retired couple without kids – “That’s not fair, I don’t have any children in school!” A football team is coughing up the ball and the coach says that the next time someone fumbles, the whole team is running laps – and the cry goes out – “That’s not fair!”

In our text, Israel of old was complaining that – “The way of the Lord is not just.” “It’s not fair” for us to suffer as we are – we’re suffering for the mistakes of others – we don’t deserve to live like this.

What’s all the complaining about in Exodus 18? Well, God’s people have been undergoing a lot of suffering. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has already been destroyed by the Assyrians – and the Southern Kingdom (Judah), was under attack by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians.

As a matter of fact, in the year 597 B.C. the Babylonians had captured Jerusalem and sent some 10,000 Jews into exile. They were forced out of Jerusalem, banished from the promised land, and taken to the distant country of Babylonia.

Ezekiel, the prophet, was among the exiles. He was God’s spokesman to the house of Israel who longed to return to Jerusalem and the Temple – but Ezekiel had bad news for them. Jerusalem would fall – and in 586 B.C. – the city and the Temple were burned. The only hope extended to them – was the hope of living in peace with God during their exile.

“That’s not fair!” was their cry. It was our fathers who turned away from the Lord to worship other gods – why should we have to pay for the sins of our fathers? That’s what the proverb is all about – “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Like a nursing child who suffers because of what the mother has eaten – the cry goes out ...

The Lord responds to their complaint by swearing an oath: “As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel ... 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.”

It's true that they suffered because of what their fathers had done – but that's not the issue at hand, they're missing the point. These people, not their fathers, are suffering because they themselves have turned away.

They have followed in their fathers' footsteps by worshipping false gods, and forgetting the Lord. They are overlooking their own sin – and therefore, like their fathers – they are not repentant. “It's not fair!” overlooks their own sin – denies their accountability before God – and tries to pass the buck of responsibility. And they have convinced themselves – “I don't deserve this.”

We hear this Word of the Lord today – not as a historical account – but as a Word that pierces our own hearts. We overlook our sins, deny our own accountability before God – when we cry, “That's not fair!”

It's easy to overlook our own sin when we blame others for what we are now experiencing. It's true, we do suffer on account of others – the consequences of a divorce, the abuse of authority of those who govern, the harm that comes to us from the bad choices of others. But in the midst of all that – we cannot deny our own sin, and what our sin deserves.

We also fail to realize our sin when we rely on the righteousness of our fathers – the mentality that say, “My family have been members of this congregation for years.” Or when we think the lack of suffering in our lives means we have not rebelled against the Lord. We don't pay for the sins of our fathers – AND – they can't pay for our sins. The Lord is clear – “The soul who sins shall die.”

The Lord speaks to us through His servant Ezekiel today so that we might see our sin and our own need for righteousness. Each one of us will stand before the judgment seat of God – where we cannot pass the blame – or claim the credit of others. Each one of us needs to see our sin, and our need for forgiveness.

The “Christian Questions with Their Answers” (prepared by Dr. Martin Luther for those who intend to go to the Sacrament) is helpful in this regard. “But what should you do if you are not aware of this need [for forgiveness] and have no hunger and thirst for the Sacrament? “To such a person no better advice can be given than this: first, he should touch his body to see if he still has flesh and blood. Then he should believe what the Scriptures say of it” [namely, that sin and death and the sinful nature clings to us as long as we live in the flesh in this world].

Second, that he look around to see whether he is still in the world, and remember that there will be no lack of sin and trouble, as the Scriptures say ... Thirdly, he will certainly have the devil also around him, who with his lying and murdering day and night will let him have no peace, within or without, as the Scriptures picture him [namely, as the roaring lion who seeks to devour the Christian, or as a trap that seeks to take us captive].”

And so, the Lord says to us what He always says to His people – “I will judge you ... every one according to his ways ... Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”

In repentance, we do not overlook or deny our sin. Standing before God, we confess that we cannot make things right. We know that in all fairness – we deserve to die for our sin, and suffer their eternal consequences.

But that is not what your loving Father desires. “Why will you die,” He says? “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live.”

In repentance this day we cry to the Lord: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free Spirit.”

Dearly beloved, this day, the Lord gives you a new heart and a new spirit. A new heart that hungers and thirsts for righteousness – a righteousness given to you this day by Christ in His absolution, and with His Body and Blood.

The Lord gives you this day a new spirit –by which you thank and praise Him for all His undeserved goodness – a new spirit given to you in His Son, Jesus Christ – in whom you have forgiveness, life and salvation – now, and forevermore. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.