

## Sermon Draft

Text: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

Sermon: “God’s Pleasure”

Today’s lessons call us to take a good, hard look at ourselves. Jesus answering a question with a question in the Gospel challenges the Jewish leaders to assess their earlier reaction to John the Baptist’s call to repentance. Ezekiel’s questions in the Old Testament Reading indict Judah for blaming God and excusing their sins.

When it comes to the ones we love and see every day we hopefully know what makes them happy. We figure out what pleases them.

Have you ever thought what gives God pleasure? What makes God happy? Joyful worship. Obedience. Prayer. Faith. Love.

All these are parts of the larger answer God gives to that question through the prophet Ezekiel. But did you hear that last sentence in today’s Old Testament Reading? ***“I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live”*** (v 32). What is God’s good pleasure? That we live!

The Bible's every page tells God's delight in life. In the beginning, ***"the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature"*** (Genesis 2:7). And this ***"God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"*** (John 3:16).

The joy of Jesus' heart? He tells: ***"I came that [you] may have life and have it abundantly"*** (John 10:10). Jesus died to give us life. Jesus rose again to life to pour into us the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. ***"We were buried therefore with [Christ] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"*** (Romans 6:4).

Down to the Bible's last chapter, ***"The Spirit and the Bride [the Church] say, 'Come.' . . . Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price"*** (Revelation 22:17).

At this font, the Holy Spirit does pour out life for each of us. At this table, the resurrected Jesus feeds us with his own living self. He is everlasting life. At this pulpit, our Father speaks into our hearts new life. What is God's good pleasure? That we live!

Why then do people die? Why sometimes do I feel dead inside? Why do some go down to damnation, the horror of never-ending death? Of course, the simple answer is SIN.

Death does not give God pleasure, never! People chase their own pleasures; that is the killer! The Lord says in our text, ***“Turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin”*** (Ezekiel 18:30).

God designed us for life, even life like his own. His life overflows with self-giving love. But what if we live to please the self, ourselves? James describes the twisted details. ***“Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death”*** (James 1:14–15). Selfish desire impregnates us with the killer. Sin births death!

The sinner believes “I must make myself happy. It’s all about my pleasure.” We work and work to get a life. Yet our sin earns only more of the unhappy wage. **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 6:23). God once and for always delights freely to give us life.

God makes it abundantly clear. **“As I live, declares the Lord GOD... 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.”** (Ezekiel 18:3–4). Turn down his gift of life and we are goners, gone forever. Yet today, the living God still calls to us: “Turn to me, and live!”

“We know all that,” Ezekiel’s hearers gripe. “Sin brings death, yes. Right here see how God isn’t fair! Our grandparents fifty years ago followed that wicked King Manasseh (2 Kings 21). They worshiped idols. They shed innocent blood. They offered their own children in sacrifice. And still they lived as prosperous and free! Our parents these last fifteen years followed our recent evil kings (2 Kings 23:31–24:20).

They, too, turned away from the true God those twisted people that they were. But God gave them their homeland! Now see our generation, Ezekiel. We are exiles, slaves of Babylon! Why does God give us this grief? We aren't perfect; but we aren't as bad as our perverse parents!"

Ezekiel's people quoted a lame excuse that had become proverbial: ***"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"*** (Ezekiel 18:2). "Nothing bad happened to our fathers. Chomping sour grapes, for them life was sweet, delicious. But for us, their innocent children? We're the ones grinding our teeth, sick to our stomach!"

Six hundred years before Jesus, Ezekiel was hearing the blame game. God had heard people pass the hot potato ever since Adam. ***"It's not my fault. Blame the woman whom you gave to be with me!" Eve, too, bounced her blame. "The serpent deceived me"*** (see Genesis 3:12–13).

Do people play the blame game today? "I'm a victim of circumstances beyond my control."

Every one of us could name some culprits. “My life is not fair!” Who could blame you for griping?

Who could blame God if he ignored our excuses? His mutinous, murderous creation he could have abandoned. No! Like a friend heart-struck by accusation, God defends himself even to us: “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?” (Ezekiel 18:25). “You blame others for your own evil. My justice stands true!” “When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it” (v 26). No excuses! The injustice that he has done his sin will kill him; not somebody else.

Still, God says, ***“When a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life”*** (v 27). God is ever eager to forgive, to give life! God declares, ***“Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die”*** (v 28).

***“Yet . . . Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ O . . . Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God”*** (vs 29–30).

God promises, we will not be punished for our parents’ sins, not for any others’ wrong. We are responsible for ourselves. We are accountable for our own sin. But I don’t want to die not for others’ sin, and not for my own sin!

God commands, ***“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”*** (vs 30–31)!

That’s the problem! Where can I cast my transgressions away from myself? My twisted old heart wants to get away with what I want. My heart is dying, dead. My old spirit is selfish. The wind is knocked out of me. Could a heart surgeon transplant a heart into herself? How can I make myself new? Who can rescue me from myself?

In his very command, hear God's promise! He will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. ***"Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live"*** (vs 31–32).

Only you can ***"create in me a clean [new] heart, O God."*** Only you can ***"renew a right spirit within me"*** (Psalm 51:10). Turn us away from ourselves. Turn us to you. Away from our sin, turn us to your forgiveness. Away from our deserved death, turn us to your gift of life!

The resurrected Jesus has given the Good News that changes everyone. We know what pleases God. ***"God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"*** (John 3:16). God gives life! So, let us value the gift of life God has given us through his Son.

I've been attending the President's Equip Conference this week, virtually of course and one of the speaker's words of encouragement was to remind us that it is all about LOVE.



Especially in these trying times where hate seems to be the norm, we need to be reminded of how loved we are by God. We are One Body, One Spirit. Let us love as we have been loved. Let us care more about others than we do about ourselves.

Amen