

On the Character of God (Ezekiel 18)

I. Why This Lesson

- a. I received feedback recently regarding recent lessons we have had (on spiritual war; lessons from gospel of John on: judgment, light and darkness, resurrection from the dead, divinity of Christ, OT prophecies being fulfilled, etc.)
 - i. Question I was asked: “Why all these heavy, serious lessons? Can’t we talk about more encouraging things, like how much God loves us? Or about Jesus being the good shepherd who looks out for us?”
 - ii. My response: In expository teaching, I have to stick to the text and the points that the writers are making. And “the good shepherd” is coming, when we get to **John chapter 10**.
- b. Even though most of our lessons are expository, we also want to include some topical lessons as well. And we want to cover the full range of things addressed in Scripture. (And like everyone else, I have my blind spots and favored topics; and I can over-react against topics that I have heard a lot of sermons on in the past.)
- c. This particular lesson was suggested by my wife Alison, following a long discussion she and I had recently about one aspect of the nature of God as revealed **Ezekiel 18**.

II. Why I teach the Old Testament so much

- a. I was on a business trip in Canada all this past week and had dinner one night at a Chinese restaurant in Ontario with an engineering colleague. We were talking about the Bible and life, and he asked me why, as a Christian, I taught so much on the Old Testament.
- b. I explained some of the reasons.
 - i. Lessons from the OT had a great impact on me as a young Christian.
 - ii. It is $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Bible, yet largely neglected by many churches and many Christians.
 - iii. Great way to convince unbelievers, as they did in the **Book of Acts**.
 - iv. Extremely valuable if we really want to understand the New Testament (for example, “saving faith” defined in **Hebrews 11** by over 30 examples from the Old Testament).

- v. Through stories of the Old Testament, I can understand the character of God as he really is, as revealed through the Old Testament stories.
- vi. And His character has not changed!

III. The Challenge of Seeing God as He Really Is

- a. Why is it hard for most people to see the character of God clearly?
 - i. Many people start with their own father, and assume God is like that. The problem is that few fathers are perfect. In fact, some fathers are
 1. Abusive, fits of rage, violent, unstable, alcoholics
 2. Unfaithful, unreliable, abandoned their wife or children
 3. Absent
 4. Arbitrarily play favorites among their children
 5. Distant, preoccupied, cold
 6. Permissive, enablers; or controlling, harsh disciplinarians
 - ii. Many like to create their own personal God, filling in only the traits that they want God to have. This “God” may turn out to be a lot like they are (turning a blind eye to certain sins, for example). They essentially “make God in their own image”.
 1. For example, some might think God doesn’t mind if I get drunk, because “*Since God is just like me and my friends, I am sure He doesn’t mind if I have a few drinks and ‘have a good time’*”,
 2. Or, “*Surely God doesn’t mind ‘small lies because He is just like me, and I don’t think telling small lies is a big deal’*”.
 3. This is the reverse of what it says in **Genesis 1:26-27**: “**God made man; in the image of God He made him; male and female He made them.**”
 - a. We are made in the image of God. *We have no business trying to create a ‘God’ who is made in our own image!*
 - iii. Satan is always trying to deceive and confuse us, to trick us into sin.
 1. From the beginning Satan has been lying to people about the nature of God, distorting how God really is. Satan attacks at the foundation: our understanding of God’s nature. If Satan can get us to mistrust God, or think wrongly about God’s nature, it makes it much easier for him to tempt us with sin.

2. Let's look at how Satan deceived Eve, telling her things that were not true about God's nature and character. Read **Genesis 3:1-6**.
 - a. Satan essentially says that God cannot be trusted. Satan presents God as a liar (God had said that if they ate of the food they would die; Satan said that was not true). Satan tells the woman that God does not mean what He says. Satan also tells the woman that God is exaggerating the consequences of sin.
 - b. Satan implies that God is an oppressor. Satan presents God as trying to oppress her (Eve) and Adam, limiting their ability to fulfill their full potential and keeping them ignorant.
 - c. Satan pretends that God as not have our best interests in mind. Satan presents God, who created Adam and Eve, as: not really loving people, and not looking out for what is best for them.
 - d. Satan teaches that God does not need to be feared, and His commands do not have to be obeyed. Satan attacks BOTH the idea that God loves them, and that they need to fear God.
3. **Satan successfully weakens Eve's defenses by undermining how she understood the character of God**. Satan puts a wedge between Eve and God. Satan then leads her to sin.
4. Satan attempts to do the same to everyone, all the time!
- b. This is one of the reasons why idolatry (worshiping an image) was so offensive to God.
 - i. God told Moses and Israel: do not make an idol to represent God, in the image of anything on earth, in the sea or in heaven.
 1. **Exodus 20:1-6** The second commandment was to not make idols (images) to represent God; do not worship them. (First commandment was to worship no other "gods".
 2. **Exodus 32** The people made a golden molten calf and then worshiped it. Aaron said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (**Exodus 32:4**, NKJV)
 3. **Deuteronomy 9:15-21** Moses retells the story of the golden calf incident, including how angry God was, wanting to destroy Aaron and the people. Moses prayed 40 days for the people to

be spared; He burned, and crushed the image, then threw the dust into a stream.

4. **Isaiah 40:18-31**

- a. We must see God for who He really is.
 - b. He cannot be reduced to image of an animal or anything other material, visible thing.
 - c. He does not need anything; He created all things; He does not grow weary or hungry, like a bull or an ox.
- c. The challenge to “seek God” starts before we believe in Jesus; but should last our entire life: to draw closer to God and see who He really is (not how our own fathers were, not how we wish He was, not how Satan tries to distort Him).
- i. Read **Acts 17:22-31**
 1. Paul is speaking to unbelievers in Athens.
 2. He tells them there is one God who made all things; He cannot be reduced to an image.
 3. We are created to seek the Lord, and to find Him (and He is close at hand).
 4. We are God’s offspring.
 - ii. **Hebrews 11:5-6** – The call to seek God is for Christians, too. Recall that **Hebrews chapters 10-11** were written to Christians, to exhort them to continue to live by faith until the end, and not shrink back.
 1. “By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, and was not found, because God had taken him; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” (**Hebrews 11:5-6**, NKJV)
 2. This refers back to Genesis where it says, “Enoch was well-pleasing to God, and was not found, for God translated him.” (**Genesis 5:21-24**, LXX, OSB)
 3. This is the great challenge for all Christians: to seek God throughout our entire lives!

IV. Seeing the Character of God Revealed in Ezekiel 18

a. Read Ezekiel 18:1-20

- i. A story of three generations:
 1. The first man is righteous; “he will surely live”.
 2. His son is not righteous; “he will surely die”.
 3. The grandson of the first man is righteous; “he will surely live”.
- ii. Since everyone dies, I assume this “living/dying” refers to spiritual life and death.
- iii. This seems to make sense to most of us: the person who sins is the person who will die, while the person who is righteous is the person who will live. Sin (and punishment) as well as righteousness (and life) do not pass down from parents to their children as inherited things (unlike wealth, blue eyes and black hair).
- iv. A few other important lessons:
 1. In this story a righteous man can have an unrighteous son, and vice-versa. Everyone has free choice; we are not robots and someone can turn to evil even with the best parents. (Lots of examples of that in Scripture).
 2. However, it goes both ways. Satan can be defeated even by a parent’s sin: when a son sees the wickedness of his father, learns from that and chooses a different (righteous) path. I have seen many examples of that over the years, too!
- v. “Righteousness” is defined here by examples, living according to the commands of God.
 1. Of course, in Ezekiel’s time this meant following the Law of Moses (so some of these commands may not apply to us today).
 2. **Jeremiah 31:31-34** (corresponding to **Jeremiah 38** in the LXX) speaks of a time when God will bring about a new covenant, with new laws. That was brought through Jesus, as it says in **Hebrews 8** and **10:15-18** and alluded to in **2 Corinthians 3**).
- vi. Some may struggle with the idea that people are being referred to as “righteous” here. After all, didn’t Paul say in **Romans 3** that no one is righteous; and no one will be declared “righteous” by observing the Law?

1. Yet Peter had no problem calling Lot “righteous” in **2 Peter 2:7-8**
 2. Jesus spoke of righteous people who shed righteous blood before His time (from Abel to Zechariah), in **Matthew 23:34-35**.
 3. Therefore, we should not have a problem with the passage in Ezekiel. Perhaps righteous can be used in more than one sense; it does not necessarily mean that they were flawless (without any sins).
- vii. The main point: each person will stand before God on the basis of his or her own life: regardless of the goodness or wickedness of his parents.
1. This makes sense to us, but apparently some of the Jews struggled with this
- b. Now the challenging part! Read **Ezekiel 18:21-32**
- i. If a lawless man repents, God will forgive him; *he* shall live, too! (**18:21**)
 - ii. He asks a rhetorical question, “Do I ever will the death of a lawless man?” His implied answer: No! (**18:23**)
 - iii. It goes the other way, too. If a righteous man turns to sin, he will die! (**18:24**)
 - iv. People are clearly struggling with this approach God is taking.
 1. Maybe they think God should “balance it out” over the course of a person’s life?
 2. What if someone like Hitler were to repent on his deathbed. Should he be forgiven, too?
 3. What if a saintly person (like a Mother Teresa) lived an entire life doing good, but turned from God at the very end? Should someone like that die and be condemned?
 4. Be honest: does this seem fair to you?
 - a. Should the person who repents at the very end of life be treated the same as one who was living a righteous life all along?

- b. Should the person who sins only at the very end of life be treated the same as one who lived an unrighteous life all along?
- v. The key verse here is the last verse: “For I do not will the death of the one who dies.” (**Ezekiel 18:32**)
 - 1. God does not want *anyone, even the most wicked person*, to perish. That has always been the case.
 - a. “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (**1 Timothy 2:1-4**, NKJV)
 - 2. This is so important to understand about God’s nature.
 - a. Many who struggle with believing in God, cannot accept a God who would want to destroy most people at the end. This is a wrong understanding of God!
 - b. God wants everyone to repent.
 - c. God’s heart is that all men be saved. He does not want anyone to die.
 - 3. What matters is *how we finish the race* (a race which could end at any time).
 - a. This is wonderful news for those who need to repent. The Lord is pleading for them to repent in **v. 30-31**.
 - b. This is sobering news for those who have been living righteous lives thus far.
- vi. A classic example of God restoring someone wicked who turned back to God near the end of his life: Manasseh, perhaps the most wicked king of Judah (before he repented), in **2 Chronicles 33:1-20**.
- vii. This aspect of God’s character that was considered “unfair” by the Jews in **Ezekiel 18**, is highlighted by Jesus in His parables about the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Prodigal Son (**Luke 15**). Perhaps this is also in the parable about the “unfair” landowner who pays the last workers the same as the first ones who bore the heat of the day, in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (**Matthew 20:1-16**).

V. Implications of this Aspect of God's Character, for Us

- a. God is indeed merciful, and we should have the same attitude, wanting all to repent (and none to perish).
 - i. Clement of Alexandria, an early Christian teacher who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, writing around the year 200 AD, provides us with a touching and memorable image of a loving God, always urging us to repent of sin, for our own good:
 1. "For God, of His great love to man, comes to the help of man, as the mother-bird flies to one of her young that has fallen out of the nest; and if a serpent opens its mouth to swallow the little bird, 'the mother flutters round, uttering cries of grief over her dear progeny;' and God the Father seeks His creature, and heals his transgression, and pursues the serpent, and recovers the young one, and incites it to fly up to the nest."
 2. Source: Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*. In Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2, p. 197.
 - ii. May we hold on to this image of God and imitate it!
- b. God's grace is no license to sin. We must repent if we are to find mercy.
 - i. I am reminded of another quote from Clement of Alexandria, expressing a healthy perspective on sin and repentance:
 1. "For it is indeed noble not to sin; but it is good also for the sinner to repent; just as it is best to be always in good health, but well to recover from disease."
 2. Source: Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*. In Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2, p. 230.
- c. If we have been overcoming Satan thus far, we must finish the race. Paul expressed concern about this for himself in **1 Corinthians 9**.
 - i. **Ezekiel 18** actually provides *a warning to the righteous*, while giving *hope to the unrighteous*, the reverse of what many think God should be doing!
 - ii. We can be secure in our salvation *if we continue to repent and stay on the path*.
- d. God has always going the extra mile to help people repent so that He can forgive them. He sent his prophets, and He sent His Son. May this beautiful picture of God's mercy, presented in **Ezekiel 18**, help us understand God's character and nature – so we can see God, our Father, as He truly is!