



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 16 Issue 38

October 8, 2017

Manifesto on Church Membership, Part 4

One of the most popular courses taught at various seminaries is an elective called Pastoral Problems in the Ministry. Occasionally these classes are taught by seasoned pastors who help bring the class discussion beyond the theoretical right to where the ministry occurs.

Ezekiel 33, in my estimation ought to be one of the more popular sections of Ezekiel as it likewise addresses the calling and responsibility when it comes to the pastoral care of the body. As all of us have been charged with the ministry of each other, I can't imagine that this text wouldn't be one of the more helpful we could turn to. It gives us practical examples:

- What pastoral care looks like.

- How we go about investing in the body of Christ effectively.
- What it means to fulfill our God-given calling to the body of Christ.

We have seen that Ezekiel 33-37 was written at the time of the fall of Jerusalem (~586 BC). Accordingly, what God says here to Ezekiel was intended to be a model/an example for the newly arriving exiles from Jerusalem. In this regard, what was the first message God gave to Ezekiel and, by implication, to the people of God?

Ezekiel 33:7a, “Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel...”

By application God’s people could take this as their marching orders when it came to their responsibility one to another (vv. 1-9). Truly, their calling was to watch out for one another and so take responsibility for the spiritual welfare of each other. Jeremiah, speaking of Josiah, “‘He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?’ declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 22:16).

As we have seen, pastoral care is not an option when it comes to the body of Christ! Yet practically speaking, what did this mean? Vv. 10-20 provides a practicum on caring for the body of Christ when it comes to the one made confident on account of their “Moral Superiority,” vv. 12-16.

A foundational principle in the Kingdom of God is that the Kingdom of God is not merit based.

Ezekiel 33:12, “And you, son of man, say to your fellow citizens, ‘The righteousness of a righteous man will not deliver him in the day of his transgression, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he will not stumble because of it in the day when he turns from his wickedness; whereas a righteous man will not be able to live by his righteousness on the day when he commits sin.’”

This is the foundation of the exhortation God gave Ezekiel in vv. 13-16. Now, there is a back story to this verse that we need to know in order to understand fully the point here.

Have you ever wonder how the people of God remaining in Jerusalem processed the first two exiles? In the first exile in 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar won a decisive victory over Egypt at Carchemish. In their pursuit of the fleeing Egyptians, the Babylonians came to Judah where they were met with opposition from the Judean King, Jehoiakim. That was a mistake! Because of this opposition, Nebuchadnezzar held Jerusalem in siege which didn’t last long for Jehoiakim quickly surrendered.

On account of his opposition, Jehoiakim was ordered to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar as tribute both gold and the brightest and best of the next generation. Accordingly, the best of the best of the youths of Israel were taken into exile at this time (recall, this was the exile that took Daniel and his friends to Babylon).

That brings us to the second exile. As a vassal and puppet king to Babylon, things were difficult both for Jehoiakim and the nation. Accordingly, when Egypt won a decisive victory over Nebuchadnezzar in 600/599 BC, Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon, giving his allegiance to Egypt! And at this time, Nebuchadnezzar was too plagued by internal, national problems to take action against Jerusalem. Yet by 598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had addressed these problems, and “in the spring when kings go to battle” he marched on Judah.

Before Nebuchadnezzar could get there however, Jehoiakim died. Accordingly, Jehoiakim’s son, Jehoiachin, was left to deal with the impending threat of the Babylonians! Three months into Jehoiachin’s reign, on March 15/16, 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar arrived in Judah where he deposed Jehoiachin and placed his uncle, Zedekiah (Josiah’s third born son), on the throne. The Babylonian king then left Israel taking with him 10,000 more exiles of which Jehoiachin, his mother (Nehushta), state officials, and leading citizens were a part (this was the exile in which Ezekiel was transported in chains to Babylon)!

Now you would think that after the ministrations of Nahum, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk — all of whom warned Israel at this time that if they did not turn from their sin, they would be destroyed — the first two exiles would have been greeted by God’s people who remained in Palestine with humility, brokenness, and repentance. Instead and AMAZINGLY, those who remained concluded that they were morally superior to those who left in chains.

Ezekiel, referencing the second exile wrote, “Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, your brothers, your relatives, your fellow exiles, and the whole house of Israel, all of them, *are those* to whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, “Go far from the Lord; this land has been given us as a possession”” (Ezekiel 11:14-15)

You say, “How could God’s people at this time be so blind? So spiritually obtuse?” Answer: Part and parcel of their theology was the belief that God helped those who helped themselves. This is a belief that has plagued God’s people throughout Redemptive History. We see it in the working knowledge of the disciples, “And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?’” (John 9:1-2). Clearly if someone suffers it is because of their or their parent’s sin. That is the world and so the thinking in which the majority of God’s people lived throughout Redemptive History.

We also see this same thinking in the book of Job. Speaking to Eliphaz who essentially told him that he was suffering on account of his sin, Job said, “Teach me, and I will be silent; and show me how I have erred... And now please look at me, and see if I lie to your face. Desist now, let there be no injustice; even desist, my righteousness is yet in it. Is there injustice on my tongue? Cannot my palate discern calamities?” (Job 6:24, 28-30).

In response to Eliphaz who charged Job with private sin, Job essentially said here that he was wrong. Throughout the adult years of his life God blessed Job — though the patriarch was a

sinner (Job 1:5; 19:25-27). Of late nothing had changed (Job hadn't fallen into new sin). So why was God cursing him now?

Do you see his flaw? Job lived in a merit-based world where it was believed that what a man received from the Lord is what he earned (cf. Job 27:13-23). Such was the theology of God's people at the time of the exile. Ezekiel taught God's people at this time, "Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, BUT THEIR CHILDREN'S TEETH ARE SET ON EDGE'?"' (Ezekiel 18:1-2). Clearly a major tenet of Judaism during this era is that you get what you or your family earned/deserved.¹

Lamentations 5:7, "Our fathers sinned, *and* are no more; it is we who have borne their iniquities."

This explains why those remaining in Palestine looked with contempt upon the exiles of 605 and 597 BC. If they remained in the Promised Land while others were cursed (and so removed from it), that must mean that they were righteous!

Now enter the exile and view life from the perspective of the Jewish captive. At first no doubt it would have been hard knowing that their friends and loved ones all considered them cursed (and hence the reference in Ezekiel 11)! What then do you suppose was the attitude of those in exile to the newly arriving exiles? The response no doubt would have been two-fold:

1. First there would have been a sense of vindication. *So you who mocked when we were in chains... look at you now! Who now is the wicked?! Who now is the righteous?!*
2. Second and most damaging, there would have been a sense of moral superiority over those newly arriving. Yes, those Jews already in Babylon prior to 586 BC were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon, YET, They did so WITHOUT the tragedy of war, burning, pillaging, raping, and death. Furthermore, they arrived in Babylon only to be educated, courted, and empowered to serve in official positions. Their curse turned out to be quite a blessing!

This is such a contrast to the exiles of 586! They arrived half dead and wholly cursed. Under their watch, God's people lost not only their homeland, but also the temple! So when we come to Ezekiel 33:12-16 and the pastoral charge given to Ezekiel (and so God's people) regarding the newly arriving exile, the message is so important.

Ezekiel 33:12a, "And you, son of man, say to your fellow citizens, 'The righteousness of a righteous man will not deliver him in the day of his transgression, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he will not stumble because of it in the day when he turns from his wickedness...'"

Who are the "righteous" here? Those Jews who had attained to positions of power and success in Babylon! Who are the "wicked"? Those Jews who just arrived in chains, traumatized and

weeping on account of the destruction of the temple and their homeland! What is the message? Neither group ought to look upon themselves as cursed or blessed. God's past dealing with either group is NO indicator of His approval! For truly, the Kingdom of God is NOT merit based. God does NOT place us in a balance to weigh our good deeds verses our bad and then act accordingly! Unless you are under formal discipline, bad things that occur in this life are NOT payment on account of current sin! And good things that occur in this life are NOT a testimony of inward righteousness!

This was the message and point that God gave His people prior to the final exile, a message which those in exile at the time clearly ignored! See prior to this time, Ezekiel had already charged the people of God:

Ezekiel 18:20, "The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself."

God's people heard this, but they didn't take it to heart. Accordingly, in our text this morning, God went on record a second time in order to set His people straight: The Kingdom of God is NOT Merit Based.

Now because God's people in exile did NOT heed the words God gave them in Ezekiel 18, when the final exile did occur, those Jews receiving their wounded comrades did NOT greet them with open arms, love, compassion, or care. RATHER, they looked upon them with suspicion, as wretched sinners who were getting what they deserved on account of their sin (consider Ezekiel 34!!).

Sadly, there are many in the body of Christ today who share this same perspective. They view themselves as morally superior to others on account of their station in life, their success, their lack of outward sin, etc. They view others with contempt on account of their obvious and outward sin! They view themselves as objects of God's displeasure!

Yet such a perspective must never be held on the part of the child of God. Listen to the word of God:

Romans 3:23, "For all [24 being justified as a free gift...] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

All stand before God condemned on account of their sin!

Psalms 130:3, "If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?"

The answer is, "No One!" In fact, if there is a distinction to be made, it revolves around those whose sin is private and those whose sin is public.

1 Timothy 5:24, "The sins of some men are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their *sins* follow after."

No one is above sin! All stand guilty before God! Recall the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican?

Luke 18:9-10, "And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer...'"

Pastorally speaking, because the Kingdom of God is NOT merit based, we can and ought to show sympathy to any and all struggling with sin!²

That having been said, if you are awake, you might already have taken issue in your mind with my main point, "The Kingdom of God is NOT Merit-Based." Admittedly, the statement is imprecise. For, when it comes to our standing before God, all actually do stand before God on the basis of their own merit! If you sin one time, you must suffer eternity in hell separated from God. If you obey God perfectly, then you can demand to spend eternity with God in glory.

Now no one is in the latter group which means all stand guilty before God. Yet you say, but that is why Christ came! And you are correct. When it comes to standing before God in Christ, we still reject the premise that God's Kingdom is NOT merit-Based. For in Christ, we stand before God on the basis of Christ's Merit...

2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

This means that at all times we interact with God on the basis of His grace and mercy given us in the Lord.

So how is it that I/we can say that The Kingdom of God is NOT Merit-Based? We say this in reference to the redeemed individual and the works of his hands! Because of Christ, NOTHING we do can earn either favor or wrath from God. Our right-standing is based on the Righteousness of Christ! In this way- in our day to day living- the Kingdom of God is NOT Merit-Based!

Christian, we need to hear! On account of our default relationship with God in the Garden (which was and is based on works-righteousness), all of us have a passion to relate to God on the basis of our conduct. That is natural and normal. Yet in the Kingdom of God, the Lord grants us the right-standing of Christ such that now we relate to God on the basis of Christ's conduct- and no longer our own. As glorious as this is, nevertheless there is an element of our being that wants to deny this and so "rebuild again what has once been destroyed" (Galatians 2:18)!

As that is the case, on a week to week basis you will be fellowshiping with brothers and sisters EITHER who feel morally superior on account of their recent activity OR who feel like they are losers on account of their sin (and sometimes you may be numbered among them). As “watchman,” it is our calling and responsibility to minister a word of encouragement and hope to these ones.

This brings us to the pastoral implications. The following is a hypothetical case based upon the principles in Ezekiel 33:12.

Ezekiel 33:13, “When I say to the righteous [those who thought God was their friend on account of circumstantial blessing] he will surely live, and he so trusts in his righteousness that he commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds will be remembered; but in that same iniquity of his which he has committed he will die.”

This passage is rather straight forward. On account of our default relationship with God, at times we will relate to God on the basis of our own righteousness. If we do that and then sin, we will stand as though we are condemned before God! Truly, v. 12 is an important message which we must remind each other all the time. Our salvation is NOT maintained by the good works we do! Yet there is another application equally important.

Ezekiel 33:14-16, “But when I say to the wicked [those who thought God opposed them on account of circumstantial difficulty], ‘You will surely die,’ and he turns from his sin and practices justice and righteousness, *if a* wicked man restores a pledge, pays back what he has taken by robbery, walks by the statutes which ensure life without committing iniquity, he will surely live; he shall not die. None of his sins that he has committed will be remembered against him. He has practiced justice and righteousness; he will surely live.”

This should make sense now. IF a sinner turns from his sin to the Lord (cf. the point last time, Ezekiel 33:10-11), IF in his turning his faith is genuine such that it results in a changed life³- as measured here by these things:

- “Restoring a pledge.”
- “Paying back what has been stolen.”
- “Living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

THEN we conclude that there has been a genuine turning from self to Christ such that we can say, “If your trust is in Christ alone- and not in the works of your hands (as the self-righteous)- then regardless of what you have done you can be sure that you are well-pleasing to God!”

Practically, what does it mean to be a “Watchman”? What does this look like in the context of a local body?

Being a watchman means encouraging one another that when trial and difficulty come, it is NOT because God takes pleasure in watching us squirm. His is an everlasting love which tempers us that we might mature in our love for and devotion to Christ.

Being a watchman also means ministering ever mindful that on a weekly basis there will be a portion of this body that has lapsed into relating to God on the basis of their conduct. Accordingly, our message must be one of encouragement. God could never be impressed by the work of our hands; God is only impressed with Christ.

- If you are feeling good about yourself on account of your “sinless” week, your joy is misplaced.
- If you are feeling awful about yourself on account of a sin-filled week, your despair is unneeded!
- We are received into the beloved NOT by our works, BUT by the grace and mercy of Christ alone. So rejoice in the Lord!

To do anything else is to fall into despair! Do you know what will happen if we neglect this message? We will become like Job who, relating to God on the basis of his works, said...

Job 30:21, “Thou hast become cruel to me; with the might of Thy hand Thou dost persecute me.”

As “the joy of the Lord is our strength” (Nehemiah 8:10), once again it behooves us as watchman to bring to every fellowship gathering a large bucket of the balm of Gilead and generously wipe it into each other’s wounds- lest anyone of us be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin!

Bibliography

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Newton, J., & Cecil, W. R. (2017). *Memoirs Of ... John Newton*. Andesite Press.

End Note(s)

¹ This same thinking is represented throughout Ezekiel, specifically 3:20; 18:24, 26, 27.

² John Newton made the following observation, “Those who believe the doctrines of sovereign grace often act inconsistently with their own principles when they are angry at the defects of others. A company of travelers fall into a pit; one of them gets a passerby to draw him out. Now he should not be angry with the rest for falling in; nor because they are not yet out, as he is. He did not pull himself out. Instead, therefore, of reproaching them, he should show them pity. In the same way, a truly saved man will no more despise others than blind Bartimaeus, after his own eyes were opened, would take a stick and beat every blind man he met!” (Newton & Cecil, 2017)

³ We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone! Speaking of vv. 14-15, D. L. Block wrote, “The first two statements are probably intended as a shorthand expression for the entire list of just behaviors in the Decalogue, affirming that the commitment to righteousness is more than a good idea: faith without works is dead.” (Block, 1998, p. 248)