

Guilty Pleasure

“Say to them, ‘As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live ...’” Ezekiel 33:11a.

As we began this season of Lent, you may have heard from yourself and likely from others some sort of desire to give something up. Many times, the things we target to give up can be those guilty pleasures that we enjoy. Certain foods, specific shows, scandalous social media, I’m sure most of us can think of many other things that could fit as well. Yet, as we’ve heard over the first two weeks of Lent, this season of the church year doesn’t focus on merely symptoms of our sinful struggles, which our guilty pleasures often reveal. This season of Lent focuses on the heart of the matter, our desire to control God or even replace God. And in our desire to control or replace God, we often try to make Him okay with our guilty pleasures.

Well, today’s first reading from Ezekiel, puts before us another one of those guilty pleasures, the death of the wicked. While this thought might be a little shocking to us at first, as we witness more and more sin and the pain it causes in this world, we don’t often just want a God who is serious about sin. We don’t just want a God who warns about sin’s consequences over and over again. We don’t just want a God who will punish sin. We desire a God who takes pleasure in destroying the evil and wicked and does so on our timetable. If God would have pleasure in the death of the wicked, then His pleasure would validate and maybe even satisfy our own pleasure in seeing the wicked die.

I think that it can be rather tempting for us to reason that God who is holy and righteous, who can’t tolerate sin, takes great joy in seeing sin punished and wiped off the face of the earth. Especially when we are troubled by wickedness and evil that surrounds us in this world, I think that we often try to take some sort of comfort in a faulty assumption that our joy and pleasure in seeing wicked and evil people permanently destroyed is also a joy and pleasure that God shares. Sometimes, I think we want God to be that mean, nasty junkyard dog towards the wicked and evil people that threaten us. We want to see Him get all riled up, ready to rip things to shreds, so that we can let Him off the leash as we say, “Go get ‘m!”

Another way to look at this is that, we all, really relate quite well to that prophet Jonah. As you might remember, Jonah was another prophet of God who was called to speak words of warning to the wicked city of Nineveh. After trying to avoid the Lord’s call, he goes to Nineveh preaches that their destruction is coming and then leaves and sets up camp outside the city waiting for the Lord’s destruction to come. But to Jonah’s disappointment, Nineveh repents and the Lord relents from destroying them. Jonah was angry with the Lord’s mercy! He didn’t want a God who was merciful. He also wanted a God who took pleasure in the death of the wicked!

It’s so easy for us to convince ourselves that God takes pleasure in the death of the wicked when it’s those wicked people over there, whom everyone seems to agree are wicked. If everyone agrees, then why wouldn’t God agree with us too, right? It’s much more difficult to continue this idea when we’re also part of the wicked ones to be destroyed. This is the dilemma that faced the people of Israel in Ezekiel’s time. At first, when Israel had been warned by Ezekiel of their own impending destruction, their reaction was to blame their parents. They ignored their own responsibility for their own wickedness. Then they were given other warnings as they heard Ezekiel warn the surrounding nations of their impending doom. As Israel likely witnessed some of the promised destruction take place on their enemies, this didn’t serve as a reminder of the destruction coming their way, but instead fueled their guilty pleasure to see the death of those they thought were wicked.

It’s not hard to imagine that the people of Israel in Ezekiel’s time likely were convinced that they weren’t that wicked, at least not wicked enough to be destroyed! Certainly, they were better than their ancestors whom God had to destroy and they most definitely had to be better than the surrounding nations with all their idolatry! Wouldn’t all that destruction of those worse sinners be enough to satisfy God? But the destruction promised for Israel in Ezekiel’s time began to come, and because of their faulty thinking that God took pleasure in the death of the wicked, Israel began to despair, saying, **“Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?”** (Ezekiel 33:10b)

This is what happens when we try to make God share in our guilty pleasure of the death of the wicked! Eventually, this will catch up to us as we too are included in the ranks of the wicked! That junkyard dog, that we so want God to be towards those wicked others, should turn on us and attack us because of our own wickedness. And we can't think for a second that we're going to get away because we can outrun, or outwork, someone we consider to be more wicked than us. This cushion that we like to think we have around us, a padding of people who we think need God's lawful attention more than we do is a sham! There is no, well at least I tried more than that person in God's eyes. Before God, we all stand as wicked as the next person and according to our own reasoning and according to the same reasoning our fellow partners in wickedness, the people of Israel in Ezekiel's time, God should take great pleasure in wiping us out as one of the wicked.

“Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?” (Ezekiel 33:10b)

However, our guilty pleasure of the death of the wicked isn't something that God shares. For He says, **“As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”** (Ezekiel 33:11a) These words from our Lord invite us to see and understand that in the midst of our despair and sorrow over our sin there is a future. There is hope! We aren't determined to be stuck in our sins and their guilt because that pleases God! No, God is pleased to see His Law turn us from our sins and point us to our need for Him so that He might remove sin's guilt and grant us life! God's pleasure is in repentance and forgiveness. God's pleasure is that the wicked turn and live! God's pleasure is that all might have a future with Him in heaven!

And there is no greater evidence and support of this truth than in Jesus' death and resurrection! This is where God puts His money where His mouth is! Jesus, true God, true man, dies and rises for all the wicked forever showing the world that He doesn't desire the death of the wicked but desires that they might repent and live through Him. Even as He hung on the cross, Jesus shows us this desire in the promise He makes to the repentant criminal. In response to the criminal's request that Jesus remember him when He comes into His kingdom Jesus shares that that very day, that repentant criminal would be with Him in paradise.

This is the very same promise that Jesus makes to us as we come before Him in repentance. We hear the words, “Your sins are forgiven!” And we receive this gift not because we've earned it, but because Jesus has earned this gift for us. Likewise, we come before Jesus' gift of Baptism and Communion with repentant joy knowing that in these simple gifts Jesus delivers to us His powerful work of forgiveness, life and salvation. This is the life to which we return! Life given, won and delivered to us by Christ alone.

Yet, God's pleasure of repentance and forgiveness doesn't just stop with our one-time reception. God is pleased to work repentance and deliver forgiveness daily until He returns again because He knows we need it! It pleases Him by repentance and forgiveness to change our hearts to let go of our guilty pleasures and instead increasingly hold onto the repentance and forgiveness that truly is His pleasure. As He makes repentance and forgiveness our pleasure too, He uses us to point others to His pleasure as well. His work of repentance and forgiveness in our lives becomes a beacon of light in a world darkened by sin. And to this present life that so often screams despair and hopelessness, His work of repentance and forgiveness in us points to the future and hope of life to come.

So as this season of Lent continues, no matter what sort of guilty pleasures you may or may not be trying to tackle, know that our God has come to tackle the source of our guilty pleasures, our desire to control or replace Him. He has even come to take care of our actions that try to make God okay with our guilty pleasures, especially that guilty pleasure of the death of the wicked. He has come to turn us from our desire to control and replace Him to receiving and clinging to His pleasure of repentance and forgiveness for ourselves and all. Our God truly has no pleasure in our death or the death of any other person so may we always be led by His guiding to turn from our wickedness and live in His forgiveness through Christ alone. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan