



God's Discipline

Ezekiel #4 | May 12, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | by Steve Howell

Opening



Good morning! Happy Mother's Day! I'd like to add my own thanks to all the moms out there in our congregation...and even online...for your dedication, commitment, and love. Your investment in the life of your kids is unmatched and immeasurable. I hope they tell you so today (nudge them right now, kids!), and I hope you can enjoy some time together if possible.

Note: If you didn't get your Mother's Day chocolate from our greeters, make sure to grab it on your way out this morning!

Being a mom means you wear many hats (in addition to any you might wear at work). At home, you might be a chef. You might be a doctor. You might be a teacher. You might be an alarm clock. You might be a counselor. You might be a cheerleader.



Or...if I were to choose a hat that ties in with today's passage...you might be a judge, jury, and executioner!

Disclaimer: With that intro, you might have guessed that today's passage isn't your typical Mother's Day message! I had considered doing a standard message of Mother's Day praise and encouragement...but you can read that easy, sentimental stuff in your Mother's Day cards. For our worship together, we have a chance to listen and learn from a difficult but relevant section God's Word. It's not specifically for moms, but it is important for ALL of us to hear, whether we are moms or whether we are children of moms!

As much as you love your kids, there are times when they are horrible (Amen?!?). There are times when they make terrible choices, times when they try your patience, and times when they cross a line.

That's when moms put on the hat of justice. That's when you bring out the tools of discipline. That's when you *ever-so-gently* help them see their failures and try to set them on the right path.

While the task of correction is difficult, good moms (good *parents*) must discipline their children and help them realize the negative consequences of their behaviors. It is a thankless-but-necessary job if you love your kids. And it is Scriptural!

"For our earthly fathers [and mothers] – my addition] disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness." (Hebrews 12:10, NLT)

Discipline is designed for holiness, to help others act like they should act. Moms, you wear the hat of justice and discipline to help your own kids become holy, but as you wear it, that hat also helps you better understand God Himself. The hat puts you in a prime position to better understand His heart...a heart that you'll see in today's passage out of the book of Ezekiel.



Series Recap... So Far

In case you're just joining us, we've been studying this Old Testament prophetic book and hearing how the prophet Ezekiel received and declared the Word of God.

Our overview of the book has given us some memorable moments so far:

- In chapters 1-3, Ezekiel has a mind-boggling **vision of the glory of God** and is called to proclaim God's messages.
- In chapters 4-7, Ezekiel begins his **proclamation** with deeds rather than with words. He uses "**sign-acts**" to warn the Jews of upcoming judgment and to communicate the extent to which God wanted His people to *know* Him.
- In chapters 8-11, Ezekiel has an emotionally taxing vision where he **sees God's presence depart** the Temple, and that departure makes Jerusalem's doom more certain.

Much of what we've read has been negative. Please know that there is positive material coming. There *will* be hope in Ezekiel! There *will* be moments of profound joy! But not yet. As the book continues, Ezekiel doubles and triples down on the theme of judgment, relaying more and more messages of punishment to God's people.

The messages are harsh...but the moms in here will understand why they are necessary. They'll understand why God has to wear that hat.



A Multitude of Methods (Ezekiel 12-24)

He has to wear the hat because people just don't listen.

"How many times do I have to tell you?"

Have you ever repeated a variation of that phrase, moms? Or, kids, have you ever been on the receiving end of it?

There are some tasks or behaviors that require correction again...and again...and again.



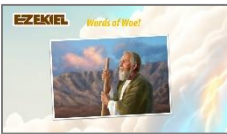
Let's say that socks don't quite make it into the hamper at your house. Moms, if this task is on your radar screen, how do you respond? You remind people, repeatedly, of course. But you also share your feelings in creative ways. You don't just say, "Put the socks in the laundry basket, please." You also...

- ...gather the socks and put them in a pile on the offender's bed.
- ...write out post-it notes and put them on the bathroom mirror.

- ...threaten to take away their cell phones.
- ...go on a laundry “strike.”
- ...let loose with a screaming tirade.
- ...hold a calm, rational discussion to plan for sock distribution.
- ...throw any item of clothing left on the floor into the backyard.

We could go on. But you understand the repetition and the creativity needed to get your point across. Sometimes it takes a **multitude of methods** to share your message because people just don’t listen.

Words of Woe!



Ezekiel can relate.

While the prophet has been engaged in his “sign-acts” (e.g. *lying on the ground for 390 days, acting out the siege of Jerusalem with a brick*), God has also called him to speak words of woe and rebuke. The words are notable, because they are the only words Ezekiel is allowed to speak during this time; Ezekiel is silent except for these messages.

But, oh the messages!



Following the vision in chapters 8-11, Ezekiel shares a dozen chapters of reprimand. Ezekiel 12-24 is filled with a smorgasbord of scolding...a buffet of rebuke...an assortment of anger. The section includes a multitude of methods to communicate. Ezekiel uses:

- **Comparisons.** Unrighteous Jews are contrasted with righteous heroes of the faith like Noah, Job, Daniel (Ezekiel 14).
- **Stories.** Dramatic metaphors of marriage and unfaithfulness showcase the Jews’ behavior (Ezekiel 23).
- **Direct messages.** The leaders of the people are chewed out for their sins (Ezekiel 20).
- **Parables.** Cryptic messages are given to encourage evaluation (Ezekiel 17).
- **Actions.** Additional sign-acts show what will take place as the city of Jerusalem is put under siege (Ezekiel 12).
- **Catchphrases.** Popular proverbs are quoted and applied (Ezekiel 18).
- **Poetry.** Stylized language showcases lament (Ezekiel 19).
- **Prose.** Narratives and allegories invite comparison (Ezekiel 16).
- **Tragedy.** Ezekiel lives out a message as his own wife dies and he is told not to mourn (Ezekiel 24).

Each one of these is worth reading and studying! We can’t cover them all in an overview series like this, but know that there is some great material in there!

Why use so many techniques? Ezekiel is taking a cue from you, moms, and the socks. Different methods appeal to different learning styles! Different approaches have more chance of success on some days than others. The reason for so many techniques is that you need every possible way to get the message across to people who don’t listen.

God has always used multiple methods to communicate His messages, and He even continues today:



*“Long ago, **at many times and in many ways**, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us **by his Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”*
(Hebrews 1:1–2, ESV)

Jesus embodies God’s approach of multifaceted messaging. He uses stories and parables and miracles and teaching and action to communicate in the Gospels. And after his death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus continues to use those different methods to get our attention and draw us to God, even today.

A wise person listens to the voice of Jesus. Yet far too often the result of proclamation is the same as the result mom gets after proclaiming a solution for socks: NOTHING!

No one is listening.

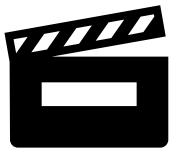
No one is listening to Ezekiel. No one is listening to God’s message.

So, when people don’t listen, you turn up the volume.

A Shocking Story (Ezekiel 16:1-58)

Some messages in the book of Ezekiel are tame. But not chapter 16. In Ezekiel 16, the volume is turned up to 11! God wears a *loud* hat of justice because people just won’t listen.

I was trying to capture the essence of this chapter in a video, and I think I found one that does the trick. It’s from the 1980s sitcom *The Cosby Show*. In it, Clair Huxtable is having a...shall we say... *conversation* with her daughter Vanessa after Vanessa did some *unapproved actions*. You won’t have to know the characters or the details to know what you should feel! Check it out.



The Cosby Show (Season 6, Episode 22)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYpVzc3qunE&t=139s>

[Mrs. Huxtable lays into Vanessa after her night of “big fun” in Baltimore]

Anyone else feel like you’re in trouble, too, after watching that?! Few things are scarier than a mom who is righteously angry!

[Side Note: Props to Phylicia Rashad for her acting. The tears in the show were real as the actress who played Vanessa reportedly said that she felt like she was getting in trouble from her own mother in the scene!]

An angry mother is a sight to behold...and you best “stay out’ tha way!”

An angry parent is nothing, however, compared to the **shocking story** God tells as he blasts the Jewish audience with some hard truths and outrageous imagery in Ezekiel 16.

Shock Value

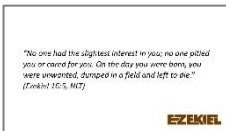


"Then another message came to me from the LORD: "Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable sins." (Ezekiel 16:1-2, NLT)

For the next fifty-six verses, Ezekiel confronts them with a brutal allegory – a story that is symbolic of God’s relationship with the people of Israel.

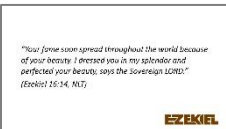
Rags to Riches

Using images connected to their culture, God’s story starts with an abandoned infant girl who is left to die in a field.



"No one had the slightest interest in you; no one pitied you or cared for you. On the day you were born, you were unwanted, dumped in a field and left to die." (Ezekiel 16:5, NLT)

But instead of a tragic ending, the story tells of the girl’s rescue and care. She is nurtured and she grows from an abandoned baby to a beautiful woman. She then develops from a beautiful woman into a dazzling bride. As a bride, she is adorned with luxury and splendor! She is given the finest accessories! She is known far and wide for her radiance...and it’s all because of God!



"Your fame soon spread throughout the world because of your beauty. I dressed you in my splendor and perfected your beauty, says the Sovereign LORD." (Ezekiel 16:14, NLT)



The allegory reminds the Israelites how God had taken them from nothing and grew them into a nation, giving them a land and blessing them with abundance. God cared for His people and protected them, providing everything they could need! They were “dressed in splendor” and “perfect in beauty.”

Up to this point, the story is a stunning picture of God’s mercy and care!

But then everything changes.

Rejecting Riches for... "BIG FUN"



Despite God’s care and investment in the bride’s success, the beautiful bride now turns against God. She transforms into an adulteress with an insatiable appetite for cheating. Ezekiel paints the picture using explicit detail and raw language. Some modern translations try to soften the words a little and keep it PG, but much of the content in the original Hebrew is R-rated at the very least.

A couple of months ago, I was teaching through Ezekiel in our Wednesday evening Bible study. This section came up, and it was certainly memorable for

the class! We read it and talked about the passage's "Not Suitable for Work" content. I read it aloud...and with feeling! Probably in no other context have I said a word that rhymes with "chore" as much as when I read that passage to them. It was rough!

So, fast forward to this week. I started working through my plan for preaching, and I knew that Ezekiel 16 was the next section I had planned to cover. I was gearing up to talk about prostitution... but then I remembered Sunday was going to be Mother's Day! Oh, no!!!! Of all the days to read this stuff!

We get so many visitors and out of town guests on Mother's Day that I hardly wanted to rhyme with "chore" 20 or more times! So...instead I will have mercy. You can read the full chapter with all its words on your own, but during service today you will get the family-appropriate version!



After the beautiful picture of the bride, in Ezekiel 16:16ff the bride engages in "BIG FUN" (to use Mrs. Huxtable's phrase from the video) with anyone and everyone and everything she can. She has "BIG FUN" with the neighboring nations – choosing to trust them instead of relying on God's protection. She has "BIG FUN" with idols – worshiping them instead of worshiping the one true God. She has "BIG FUN" offering shocking sacrifices to false gods. She has "BIG FUN" pursuing worthless people and goals using the gifts God had given her. In fact, rather than others paying to have "BIG FUN" with her, she does the unthinkable and pays them to use her!

After exposing her disgraceful sins – her "BIG FUN" – now God declares the penalty. The defiled bride will be shamed. The disgraced beauty will be judged. The unfaithful wife will be punished. The allegory blurs as the real world merges with the fictional world – the bride's personal, individual actions merge with Judah's national, corporate choices – but the effect is easy to understand nonetheless.

Judah "cheated" on God, and now it was time for God to put on the hat of justice. Judah, He says, will be destroyed by the nation of Babylon as payment for her sins.



A Covenant Commitment (Ezekiel 16:59-63)

After that painful, intense story about His people, it would be easy to assume God was done with them. The punishment could be the grand finale, the end of His relationship with the Jews. He could walk away, and no one would blame Him.

Yet there is more to the story.

Motherhood provides another connection point to the tale here. We've seen that moms can communicate their displeasure in various ways (just like God), and that moms can get angry and focus their fury in frightening ways (just like God). But at the end of the day, mom is still mom. And God is still God.

After the faithless bride is exposed and punished, God shares this declaration:

"Now this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will give you what you deserve, for you have taken your solemn vows lightly by breaking your covenant. Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you when you were young, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.... And I will reaffirm my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD. You will remember your sins and cover your mouth in silent shame when I forgive you of all that you have done. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!"
Ezekiel 16:59-63, NLT

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(Ezekiel 16:59–63, NLT)

In the wrap-up to this allegory, notice two things about God's response.

God Sees Our Sin

First, Israel had broken their covenant. God doesn't excuse it nor sugarcoat it. He sees their sins, just like He is aware of ours. In fact, He sees them better than we do.

"You spread out our sins before you— our secret sins—and you see them all."
(Psalm 90:8, NLT)

God knows the sinfulness of our sins. He knows the rebellion in our hearts. God watches all that we think is hidden.

He knows that the brutal punishment for Judah is "deserved," and that His people took their "solemn vows lightly" (Ezekiel 16:59) ...just like he knows the sins that you and I commit and the way we treat them lightly. God sees the reality of the things that destroy our relationship with Him. He is painfully honest about what we have done, currently do, and will do that separates us from Him.

Like mom, who has eyes in the back of her head, God knows what is happening.

God is Faithful Anyway

Second, despite our failures, God is faithful. He remembers His promises and His covenants. He is able to forgive.

"If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny who he is."
(2 Timothy 2:13, NLT)

This is who God is. He never stops being our Father.

Moms, I know some of you struggle with the choices of your children. You grieve over the choices they've made to ignore God or even outright reject Him. You aren't blind to it; you recognize what is happening. You've witnessed their bad choices and maybe even been estranged from them.

But if they came back (like the Prodigal Son), you'd welcome them and forgive them, right? Because you're always mom!

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EZEKIEL

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EZEKIEL

And God, despite knowing our sins, is not only willing to love us anyway...He is willing to fix it. He promises forgiveness and restoration to the Jews who rejected Him in Ezekiel. They will experience his mercy, and they will be rightly ashamed of what they had done. God's love transforms them.

And God does the same for us:

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8, NIV)

Despite our sins, God is still our God!

God's Love > A Mother's Love

That helps us understand why God puts on the hat of justice.

God Sees Our Sin

God does see our sin. *He* is not blind to our sin, even though *we* sometimes are.

Our sin is getting more difficult to see since our culture increasingly values and affirms things that violate God's standards until they seem "normal" or even "good."

Need proof? Do me a favor and look at the biggest draws in pop culture.

- 8 of the top 10 shows today on Netflix had a **TV-MA** rating. Does anyone think that I should play a clip of *The Roast of Tom Brady* in the Fellowship Hall?
- Of Billboard's Hot 100 songs, over two-thirds are labeled as **explicit**. Should we play a few of them in here after service?
- Almost all the top video games of 2024 carry the **M rating** for mature content. Shall we watch gory head shots from the latest *Call of Duty* after communion?

Church, we need to consider the vulgarity and the filth that we swim in every day. We need to recognize that it is just as offensive as "BIG FUN." And it's not just the current generation. There is different filth in different generations. One is sexual; one is profane; one is racist; one is consumed by greed; one is addicted to alcohol. It's all "BIG FUN."

And God sees it all.

God Loves Us Anyway

Yet He loves us anyway.

Why does God put on the hat of justice? It's because He loves us.

Moms know why we need to yell. Moms know why we need to punish. Moms know why we need the hard conversations. ***It is done out of love!*** You love their kids too much to allow them to act like fools. You love their kids too much to allow bad character to develop. You love their kids too much to permit behavior that will sink them in society.



A mother's love causes her to wear the hat of justice and discipline.

And God's love is greater than a mother's love!

God loves us too much to leave us as we are. He knows the emptiness that sin produces, the brokenness it causes. Better than we do, God knows how sinful sin is. And He loves us enough to fix it.

"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." (Titus 2:11–14, NIV)

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If we could learn such things from instruction or example, great! But if we don't, God is always willing to wear the hat of justice so that he can produce holiness in us.

He loves us. And He will fiercely protect us from ourselves!

Closing



As you read through Ezekiel 12-24 on your own, you might find a lot of confusing content...and lots of outrageous content. If you just skim over it, you might not grasp everything that Ezekiel is saying. But you can still hear God's heart.

Do me a favor. While you read through it, think about a mother's love. Think about what a mother is willing to do in order to protect and bless her kids. Think about the lengths she would go to ensure their future.

Then, think about a God who is willing to do even more!

Even when we ignore and reject every message He gives, God keeps communicating.

Even when we act like feral children pushing every button and testing every bit of His patience, God still sent His Son to die for us.

Even when we are out having "BIG FUN," God searches for us and brings us back to face the discipline that can bring holiness.

So, remember, church...whenever you face discipline from God...

even in the sinfulness of our sin, God loves us!



Prayer

Invitation

If you want to learn more about that love, or if you are in the middle of a situation where you need to know the love of God more, then we invite you to come forward during our song of invitation so we can pray for you today!

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Notes

A Multitude of Methods (Ezekiel 12-24)

Words of Woe! (Hebrews 1:1-2)

A Shocking Story (Ezekiel 16:1-58)

Shock Value

Rags to Riches

Rejecting Riches for "Big Fun"

A Covenant Commitment (Ezekiel 16:59-63)

God Sees Our Sin (Psalm 90:8)

God is Faithful Anyway (2 Timothy 2:13; Romans 5:8)

God's Love > A Mother's Love

God Sees Our Sin

God Loves Us Anyway (Titus 2:11-14)

Sermon Discussion ?s

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Make a list of sins that you commit, then categorize them (Not a big deal, bad, really bad, unforgiveable). What is the difference? Why do we make these distinctions?
- How would God rate your list?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Read Ezekiel 16:1-2. What purpose is stated by the Lord for the story He unfolds in this chapter? Who is the primary focus?
- Read Ezekiel 16:6-7. What does God do for this unwanted baby girl? What might be the historical equivalent for Jerusalem?
- How would you describe the grace extended to the girl (aka Jerusalem)? How does this parallel your own experiences with God's grace?
- Read Ezekiel 16:15-22. What reactions do you have to it (on a gut level)? Is there anything shocking or offensive in the story? What about the real-life practices of Jerusalem? Is the story more offensive, or are the real actions more offensive? Why?
- Why did they not recognize their sin? What causes us to disregard God's plans and commands?
- How does God feel about our sins? How does He call attention to them in our lives?
- In your personal experience, what has been the best way for you to recognize the seriousness of your own sin?
- How is God's grace magnified in the face of such horrible sin?
- What is the best part of God's grace? (personal opinion)

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Thank God for his forgiveness and restoration. Pray that God will help you learn from His discipline!