

This prophecy of Ezekiel is mysterious. It envisages two categories of people. There are those who are righteous. And there are those who are wicked. It is a simple, black and white world that the prophet sees. It prefigures the parable of Jesus, speaking of the last day, when the Son of Man “will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.” Righteous or wicked, sheep or goat, one or the other in the judgment of God.

Is life really so simple? Are there not shades of grey? Might a person not be *sort of* righteous, or slightly wicked-*ish*? How righteous is righteous? How wicked is wicked? Must the righteous person be 100% righteous? Or is 51% sufficient, so that at least righteousness outweighs wickedness? Must the wicked person be 100% wicked? Or is 51% sufficient so that wickedness gets slightly the better of righteousness? Well, on this may hinge how we must think of ourselves: sheep or goats. So they are vital questions, and this text does actually give an answer to those questions. And I think it is a rather surprising one, even for theologians who know what the answer should be. Because, oddly enough, Ezekiel’s answer – I should really say God’s answer, for Ezekiel only conveys the prophecy given to him by God – that answer doesn’t actually add up.

Let’s start with the righteous. How righteous must they be? This is pretty clear; listen: “Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die”. So for the totally righteous person, who then commits one injustice, that one thing will cancel out a lifetime’s righteous deeds. And he or she will die. That’s clear then, the qualifying standard for the righteous is 100%. One injustice immediately disbars you from the society of righteous ones, and you are cast out among the wicked. And so far the theologians will be happy. We always knew this was the case. In fact, in the New Testament James makes a similar observation: “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” It’s the 100% rule, which is far from good news for any of us who has ever fallen short of the glory of God.

But here’s the tricky bit. Now we’ll think about the wicked. How wicked do you have to be, to be condemned with that label? Well the answer should be less than 0.01%, shouldn’t it – just that one injustice that is all it takes to fail the grade for righteousness. But here is the paradox. “Again, though I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die.” In other words, a lifetime of wickedness will amount to nothing for the person who turns from sin. Which sounds like wonderful news for anyone with a lifetime of sin behind them, someone like me, for example.

But the maths does not add up. Neither does the theology. But that’s OK, it really never does. It always brings us face to face with a mystery, because “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

But we understand enough to know what Ezekiel was talking about. Through him God was explaining how repentance works. Sportsmen and women often repeat the cliché that you’re only as good as your last game. That’s most unfortunate for me because my last game of football was an absolute shocker about 10 years ago, and I’m unlikely ever to play another, so for the rest of my days I will be a completely useless wing-back, only as good, or indeed in my case, as bad, as my last game. Well before any sporting coach came up with the maxim, God was already there. You are only as righteous or as wicked as your last deed, only as pure as your last thought, only as gracious as your last word. A life-time’s history or uprightness won’t change that. Neither will a life-time of failure. You can’t live today on yesterday’s faith, or call on the merits of the past. And here is the encouraging bit – you can’t be disqualified from gaining life by yesterday’s misdemeanors.

A test case of the latter point. As our thoughts turn to our Lord's death on the cross for us, this year it is from Luke's Gospel that we hear it. And there, right at the end, sharing the dying breaths of Jesus was a man with a life-time of sin weighing upon him, and he was now bearing it through death and into eternity. But when he looked across at the Son of God, dying on the next cross for some much greater purpose, for some far greater sin, and saw a window of hope in his desperation, and pleaded, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," then Jesus assured him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." How did Ezekiel put it? "though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin ... he shall surely live. None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him"

Perhaps the mathematical mismatch is still bothering you just a little. What about the single injustice that cancels all righteousness – where must that leave us? I think you know where that leaves us. It leaves us in need of a Saviour, because without Him we shall surely die. Not, of course, for a single injustice, but for a life abounding in them, and adding to them every day. It would help us to listen again to what Ezekiel says about the righteous. "I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die." We need to pay attention to some telling words: "if he *trusts in his righteousness* and does injustice". Here surely is the crux of his peril – he is trusting in his righteousness.

Imagine someone trusting in a parachute, but that parachute is in tatters. He will surely die. In fact that punctured parachute is worse than no parachute at all, because it merely enticed the hapless soul to trust in it. A patchy righteousness might be just as dangerous. They are in particular peril who are good enough to think that they are good enough. To trust oneself – here, in the judgment of God, is to hang one's very life on the perished silk of a useless rotten chute.

Jesus once spoke of the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, more, he said, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Of course, we know that there are not ninety-nine such persons. In fact there is not one such person, only Jesus himself, of course. But there are plenty who trust in their righteousness, and the tragedy is that their misplaced faith prevents them from trusting the only one who can really save them. His righteousness is complete. It is not punctured by any injustice, and it is yours as readily as it was granted to the thief on the cross next to Jesus.

For the repentant sinner, the prophecy of Ezekiel contains some very welcome and reassuring words: "None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him." When we carry the burden of the things we have done wrong; the people we have let down, the relationships we have broken, the God we have so poorly served, nothing could sound better than this: "None of the sins that [you have] committed shall be remembered against [you]".

And that really does mean that, washed of or past by Christ, we are not as bad as our last sin, but as good as the last good thing he did in us. Amen.

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