

Ezekiel 8-11 and the Problem of Sin in the Church

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Introduction

In Ezek 8-11 the prophet is taken in vision to Jerusalem and shown the abominable things that are being done inside the temple of the Lord. One result of the wickedness he sees there is that the glory of the Lord is withdrawn and leaves not only the temple but the city as well.

There is no temple now in the twentieth century but there is still sin. The Lord has not changed his views on what is right and what is wrong. His law says the same things now that it always has. So, because the condition Ezekiel describes is still with us in principle even though the place where he was shown them is not, there are legitimate modern applications to draw from Ezek 8. But if there are right ways to apply the chapter there are also wrong ways and we must be able to tell the difference between them.

In the present paper I suggest a simple method for determining whether our approach to the problem of sin in the church is useful and sound. Of course there is always the problem of sin in our own lives. I return to that below. But here the issue is how to deal with other people's sins--sins so obvious that they cannot be overlooked.

The Problem: Abominations in the Temple

At the entrance to the north gate of the inner court of the temple there was, during Ezekiel's lifetime, an "idol that provokes to jealousy" (Ezek 8:3, 5). Also, like graffiti, "I saw portrayed [*m^hluqqeh*] all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals" (vs. 10).¹ Also along the walls were shrines for various idols--enough to satisfy even the most discriminating taste. Clustered around their favorite idols were seventy elders of the people. "Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising" (vs. 11). While the men were busy offering incense a group of women were "sitting there, mourning for Tammuz" (vs. 14).

Inside on the north side of the inner court Ezekiel saw about twenty-five men. "With their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east" (vs. 16).²

He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose! (18) Therefore I

will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them." (Ezek 8:17-18)

The Lord then summons the guards of the city and six men respond, each with a deadly weapon in his hands.³ The glory of the Lord goes up from above the cherubim on the ark of the covenant deep within the second apartment and moves as far as the outside entrance to the first apartment. A man with a writing kit is told to mark those who grieve and lament over the detestable things done in the city. Then justice is summarily executed upon those who do not have the mark. The slaughter begins at the temple and it is purposely defiled (chap. 9:5-7). The glory of the Lord moves from the threshold of the first apartment, pausing at the east gate of the outer court (chap. 10:18-19). His glory next lingers over the hill east of the city, as if looking back, but then is gone (chap. 11:22-23).⁴ It departs eastward. Ezekiel comes out of vision at this point and tells those assembled before him what he had seen (vss. 24-25).

The Analogy: Sin in the Church

There is sin in the church now, just as there was sin in the temple in an earlier age. So it is legitimate to interpret Ezek 8 as alerting us to the dangers of present sin. But exposing sin is not the same as condemning it. Our nation's tabloids love to expose sin. If people did not sin, they would have nothing to write about. But there is no benefit in their graphic portrayals of the wrong things people do. Nor is it enough to say that they approve of people's wrong deeds while we do not. With or without condoning a person's actions, merely exposing sin is not the same thing as rebuking it in the sense required by the Bible.

What Ezekiel describes is gross idolatry in the temple. Few congregations today have idols in their foyers or pastors that put the branch to their nose (Ezek 8:5, 17). So if we apply these passages at all we need to realize that we are in fact making an application and that the text does not describe exactly the same things we are dealing with. We need grace to know how to make wise, appropriate, and useful applications of this material. It should not be avoided, but it should be correctly applied. Otherwise it will be incorrectly applied.

There is a leaning toward criticism among both extremely liberal and extremely conservative groups in the church. It is not my purpose to single out one group over the other or to document the sorts of things they emphasize but rather to suggest a simple biblical approach to the problem of dealing with sins committed by others, often in positions of leadership, which can no longer be ignored.

The Approach: A Biblical Principle for Rebuking Sin

The principle I have in mind can be stated as a question: Where is the guilty party? Is he or she present? Are we speaking to or about the individual in question? Biblical preaching about sin is consistently cast in second person. Second person is "you." If we preach about sin in the third person, what we are doing might be useful but it might also amount to nothing more than gossip. Third person is "he" or "she," "him" or "her." For a rebuke to be useful the guilty

party must be present to hear it. This principle is straightforward and easy to use. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Rebuke sin directly

When Elijah wanted to preach against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:16-40), he gathered the prophets of Baal. They were present. He did not gather a multitude to tell what the prophets of Baal were doing.

When Nathan the prophet received the unenviable task of condemning King David for his illicit union with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:1-14), he did not go to the temple, assemble the congregation, and tell his fascinated hearers, "He is the man!" Instead he went to David himself and said, "You are the man!" (vs. 7).

When Jonah was told to condemn the sin of the people living in Ninevah he was not allowed to deliver that message from Tarshish (Jonah 1:1-17). He had to go to Ninevah (chap. 2:1-3). Doing so was distasteful to him, but God insisted and he went.

In a similar way, John the baptist did not tell Pharisees, tax collectors, Roman soldiers, and prostitutes about someone else's sins or tell someone else about theirs (Luke 3:1-14). He met the problem head on in each case. And when Christ delivered his stinging rebukes to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in Matt 23, He was speaking "to the crowds and to his disciples" (vs. 1), it is true, but He did not say, "Woe to them, blind guides!" He said, "Woe to you, blind guides!" (vs. 16). Both Jesus and John the baptist use the expression "brood of vipers" in reference to the religious leaders of their day (Matt 23:33; Luke 3:7), but in both cases some, at least, of the persons in question were present.

If church leadership has erred, we should not ignore the fact. But if, while not ignoring the fact, we also wish to do something about it, what we should do is address the problem at its source. There is clear instruction on how to do this.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. (16) But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' (17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Matt 18:15-17)⁵

This formula should not be run in reverse. No one has earned the right to expose sin publicly until he has gone alone to the party involved and has then taken two or three with him. Even then, the public exposure that follows should correspond to the scope of the offense and have as its purpose to explain why the party involved is being removed from office or excluded from fellowship.

Under the kind of preaching I have in mind Elijah saw the nation undergo a revival, Nathan saw David repent, Jonah saw Ninevah spared, John saw religious leaders and those rejected by society alike all begin new lives, and we should not forget that after Christ was taken up into heaven, "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). The work these men did was the right thing done in the right way. God could work with their efforts and the results speak for themselves.

Rebuke sin kindly

Imagine for a moment what the history of both the Old and New Testaments would be like if Nathan had slandered David publicly instead of rebuking him to his face. What would our Bibles be like today if David had been hardened through discourtesy instead of being made repentant under a direct rebuke. Blind Bartameus, who could not be restrained from shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47), would have had to say something else. It is true that God could have found others to rule Israel and that Christ would have had other ancestors, but what a loss there would be without David!

Along this same line, would the tax collectors and prostitutes have repented under John's preaching (Matt 21:31-32) if what he said about their sins had been addressed to others? What stories Jesus could have told about His hypocritical host in the feast at Simon's house and about the accusers of the woman caught in adultery--and about the woman herself. All the guilty secrets of these peoples' lives were open before Him. But the stories in question did not turn out as they might have.

Simon was touched by the kindness of Jesus in not openly rebuking him before the guests. He had not been treated as he desired Mary to be treated. He saw that Jesus did not wish to expose his guilt to others, but sought by a true statement of the case to convince his mind, and by pitying kindness to subdue his heart. Stern denunciation would have hardened Simon against repentance, but patient admonition convinced him of his error. He saw the magnitude of the debt which he owed his Lord. His pride was humbled, he repented, and the proud Pharisee became a lowly, self-sacrificing disciple.⁶

Before a crowd that was largely illiterate Jesus communicated with the woman's accusers privately in writing--stooping to do so in the dust on the paving stones. Unlike Simon they did not respond to Christ. But His great heart of kindness was not opened to them because of any illusion that they would respond. What we are like does not change Jesus.

And as regards Mary, who figures in both stories, it should be noted that the spirit Christ showed toward her in the one case is at least part of the reason for her response toward Him in the other case.

It was the love of Christ that constrained her. The matchless excellence of the character of Christ filled her soul. That ointment was a symbol of the heart of the giver. It was the outward demonstration of a love fed by heavenly streams until it overflowed. . . . It was Mary who sat at His feet and learned of Him. It was Mary who poured upon His head the precious anointing oil, and bathed His feet with her tears. Mary stood beside the cross, and followed Him to the sepulcher. Mary was first at the tomb after His resurrection. It was Mary who first proclaimed a risen Saviour.⁷

Discussion

The Bible is a large book. It may be that it contains examples of sin being condemned in the third person or in the guilty party's absence. One such example is before us. The vision discussed in this paper occupies four chapters. When it is over Ezekiel states, "Then the vision I had seen went up from me, and I told the exiles everything the Lord had shown me" (Ezek 11:24-25).

But there is a point here that should not be missed. No one can accuse Jesus of being weak on sin. He condemned sin consistently, wherever found. And yet the fact that He did so is only one part of His example. The courtesy of Christ's manner is another factor. On one level, Christ had a purpose for saying what He did and that purpose was to win over and reclaim people who had fallen into sin--to bring about healing. Harsh censure could not accomplish this objective. So there is the matter of goal direction. But on another level, He was thoughtful and courteous because it was His nature to be that way. If we wish to understand the nature of Christ, this is one of the facts we must consider.

When we talk about people instead of to them in regard to the wrongs they have committed we withhold the very rebuke that would benefit them. That is dereliction of duty. When sin needs to be condemned we should condemn the sin. We should not slander the sinner. These two things are widely different, they must not be confused, and the one is not an acceptable substitute for the other. No one has a biblical mandate to give free rein to a critical spirit, even if by doing so they are telling the truth.⁸

Possible Objections

Some will come forward and recite the following well known passage from Isaiah, which they know so well:

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
 Raise your voice like a trumpet.
 Declare to my people their rebellion
 and to the house of Jacob their sins." (Isa 58:1)

But this is entirely consistent with what has been said above. The passage does not say, "Declare to my people someone else's rebellion." Nor does it say, "Declare to someone else my people's rebellion." It says, "Declare to my people their rebellion" (Isa 58:1), i.e., their own rebellion.

In another place Paul counsels Timothy that, "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Tim 5:20). This instruction should be followed, but notice that the verse before it says, "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses" (vs. 19). This has a familiar ring. When we take vs. 19 with vs. 20 the larger context for Paul's remarks becomes clear.

Paul does not deny in 1 Tim 5:19-20 what Christ asserts in Matt 18:15-17, but says precisely the same things. Christ says that we should go alone to a brother who has sinned, then "take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony

of two or three witnesses"" (vs. 16) and, if this fails, ""tell it to the church"" (vs. 17). Paul says that an elder condemned by two or three witnesses should be rebuked publicly. Paul mentions parts 2 and 3 of the process, Christ includes parts 1, 2, and 3. The sequence of events is the same in both cases but Paul stresses that it must be carried through to completion.

I have emphasized the beginning of the above process in this paper because it is so often neglected. Paul emphasizes the other end of the same process. In fact none of what Christ says on this delicate topic can be set aside as unimportant or unnecessary. It is a unified whole and we have not done what He says until we have done all of it.

Other Considerations

There are two other points to make here. First, if we are unable to address a given problem directly and must talk about it in the third person, the most appropriate place to begin is on our knees. Have we prayed for the ones whose sins we feel must be brought to public notice?

And second, if we want to do something truly useful about sin in the church we should stop at our own mirrors on the way to any more public forum (Matt 7:1-5). If we address sin in our own souls and finish doing that before moving on to the sin in someone else's soul, two things will happen: First, we will not finish anytime soon. And second, our appetite for criticism just might lose some of its edge.

Conclusion

Let no one conclude from the above argument that sins committed publicly should be condoned or ignored. They must not be. What I am saying is that there is a right and a wrong way to address them. Rebuking sin when the guilty party is absent is gossip and slander. We should, after all, call sin by its right name. But it is not just a matter of definitions that I am dealing with. Unless someone first goes alone to the person who has fallen the problem remains unaddressed, regardless how much time we might spend talking about it elsewhere, and we only add new guilt to old--either by doing nothing in a case of clear need (Jas 4:17) or by doing the wrong thing. In this way we make a bad situation worse rather than resolving it. The principle I have advocated is that a person cannot benefit from what we say if he is not present to hear it. Starting anywhere else is both discourteous and ineffective.

If there are exceptions to the simple rule I have proposed, God will make clear by His Spirit what they are. But if someone reads this paper and ends by thinking that the issues in a given case are such that the principle itself can be set aside, then let that individual be very sure that he or she is precisely the one the article was written for. There is no rule if every case is an exception. If there is something to learn here, let us profit from it.

NOTE: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹The word "portrayed" is from Hebrew *m^eḥuqqeh*. It implies that the representations Ezekiel sees on the walls of the temple court might have been carved into them rather than drawn. See also 1 Kgs 6:35.

²There is another similar group in chap. 11. Jaazaniah son of Azzur is mentioned in connection with both. "There at the entrance to the gate were twenty-five men, and I saw among them Jaazaniah son of Azzur and Pelatiah son of Benaiah, leaders of the people" (Ezek 11:1). See also 8:11 (Jaazaniah) and 11:13 (Pelatiah).

³Different words are used to describe these weapons in Ezek 9:1 and 2. In vs. 1 they are called *kelî mašḥētô* "his weapon of destruction" (from *šḥt "spoil, ruin"); in vs. 2 they are called *kelî mappāšô* "his shattering weapon" (from *npš "shatter"). The intent of course is the same in both cases.

⁴When Christ laments over Jerusalem in Matt 23 it is not the first time He has done so. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate" (vss. 37-38).

⁵There is a question how we should treat pagans and tax collectors. Does it weaken the force of what Jesus said to suggest that we treat them as He did?

⁶Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages: The Conflict of the Ages Illustrated in the Life of Christ* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940), pp. 567-68.

⁷Ibid., pp. 564, 568.

⁸We should think about the effect of our words. What associations or memories do we invoke in God's mind when those who are closest to Him start harboring a spirit of criticism and spreading reports of various kinds about others. To gain insight into these things one should reread the first chapter of *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets as Illustrated in the Lives of Holy Men of Old* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1958], pp. 33-43).