

Turn and Live
Ezekiel 18:30-32
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“We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life,” writes David Brooks in *The Road to Character*.

To develop moral character we must acknowledge our own failures and weaknesses and struggle to overcome them. A culture built on ambition and success is unlikely to train people to acknowledge their failures.

We also live in a competitive culture, and the development of moral character is not competitive. First, because we are struggling against our own weaknesses and not against other people. And second because developing character takes cooperation with others.

On the first point, David Brooks writes that we develop character by “being better than [we] used to be, by being dependable in times of testing, straight in times of temptation. It emerges in one who is morally dependable. Self-respect is produced by inner triumphs, not external ones.”

On the second point—that cooperation with others is necessary—he writes, “The struggle against the weaknesses in yourself is never a solitary struggle. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from outside.”

I’ve told you this story before, but I’m going to tell it again, because it’s one of my good stories. Just ask Michael. I like to tell the same stories repeatedly.

When I was five years old and in the kindergarten Sunday school class at the First Baptist Church of Grove, Oklahoma I stole some booklets from the Sunday school room.

Of course, I’m sure they would have let me borrow the books if I had asked. But that’s not the point. The point is I knew I was doing something wrong and did it anyway. I didn’t ask, but hid them under my shirt.

By the afternoon, the guilt and shame had overcome me, so I confessed to my parents, who then horrified me by saying that we were going to take them right then to my Sunday school teacher Ruth Robinson. They wouldn’t let me wait until the next time we were in church.

Now, I’ve mentioned Ruth many times, because I believe her to be the single biggest influence on my development, outside my own parents. Ruth was the stereotypical kindergarten Sunday school teacher—she was short, elderly, with thick glasses, and bright, white hair. She was also very kind and gentle.

So, I was overcome by dread at the idea of confessing my sin to Ruth and disappointing her.

When Ruth came to her door, she was surprised to see us. My parents said that I had something to tell her. So, I told Ruth what I had done and handed her the books. Her confused look gave way to a tender smile. Ruth sat down on her couch and took me in her arms. She sat me on her lap and hugged me while she told me that she forgave me and that everything was going to be alright. She praised my curiosity and told me I could borrow things anytime, all I had to do was ask.

I've always been grateful to my parents for what may seem a strong response to a childish action, because in that moment I learned important moral lessons about my own weaknesses, about the consequences of actions, about confession and forgiveness, and most importantly about grace and unconditional love.

The prophet Ezekiel reminds the people that if they are going to enjoy abundant life, then they must first repent of their sins. This, of course, is one of the key themes of any Lenten season. As part of our preparation for Holy Week and Easter we are supposed to examine ourselves and work at improving ourselves.

David Brooks writes that "Sin is a necessary piece of our mental furniture because it reminds us that life is a moral affair If you take away the concept of sin, then you take away the thing the good person struggles against."

I appreciated his book for exploring the wide variety of sins and the moral language that describes them. He argues in the book that "people in earlier times inherited a vast moral vocabulary and set of moral tools, developed over centuries and handed down from generation to generation . . . which people could use to engage their own moral struggles." In the book he calls for a recovery of such an understanding.

Here is one paragraph where he beautifully summarizes the wide variety of sins and how to combat them:

Some sins, such as anger and lust, are like wild beasts. They have to be fought through habits of restraint. Other sins, such as mockery and disrespect, are like stains. They can be expunged only by absolution, by apology, remorse, restitution, and cleansing. Still others, such as stealing, are like a debt. They can be rectified only by repaying what you owe to society. Sins such as adultery, bribery, and betrayal are more like treason than like crime; they damage the social order. Social harmony can be rewoven only by slowly recommitting to relationships and rebuilding trust. The sins of arrogance and pride arise from a perverse desire for status and superiority. The only remedy for them is to humble oneself before others.

We are all flawed, and those flaws work to alienate us. The person of good character works to become better by struggling against those flaws. The person of good character also knows that we cannot do it alone—we need each other and we need the grace of God.

This Lent we have focused on covenant under the theme Ties that Bind. This cross has represented the way God works to turn our messes into something beautiful, by weaving them together.

Our connections with each other aren't just a nice metaphor, but are a biological necessity. This week I read an essay by the biologist David George Haskell in which he studies a maple leaf. The maple leaf actually contains hundreds of different species, and he wasn't talking about species that might be living on the outside of the leaf. No, he meant on the inside, within the cellular structure of the leaf itself. Within the cells of the maple leaf are hundreds of species. He proclaims, "A maple tree is a plurality, its individuality a temporary manifestation of relationship."

What a beautiful sentence.

We are made from relationships. Therefore if we are to live and live well, we must strengthen the ties that bind us together. Strengthen our families and workplaces, our schools and neighborhoods, our cities and states, even our nation and the world. A chemical weapons attack in Syria does affect us.

Weaving the social fabric is a moral and existential necessity. And healing our relationships begins with acknowledging and struggling against our own sins.

Hear one more passage from David Brooks' excellent book:

The best life is oriented around the increasing excellence of the soul and is nourished by moral joy, the quiet sense of gratitude and tranquility that comes as a byproduct of successful moral struggle.

The prophet Ezekiel offered the people a choice—they could choose the path of righteousness, which leads to life, or the path of wickedness, which leads to death. God implores the people to repent, to turn and live. That choice is also ours.