

WHEN YOU WANT TO BLAME OTHERS

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 21-32

Why is it so difficult for people to admit they were wrong and to accept responsibility for problems? Many times we have an idealized image of ourselves and in that idealized image we see ourselves as being perfect. While perfection is certainly a worthy goal to which we should aspire, the truth of the matter is that none of us have arrived at that condition of perfection. The denial of faults and failure to accept responsibility are usually hindrances to making improvements in our lives. In dealing with alcoholism or drug addiction, those who attempt to help people with such problems start by getting the person whom they are trying to help to admit that he or she is an alcoholic or to put the blame where it belongs.

This is not a new idea. This is in total agreement with what John wrote to the churches in his first letter in 1 John 1:9-10. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives." Most of the time, we find people who want to rationalize or justify their behavior by blaming it on their environment, their upbringing, their parents, their friends, their spouse, or anyone except themselves. This denial tendency is a product of pride and is a huge stumbling block in finding the "way" that Jesus showed us as the path of salvation.

The people of Judah who found themselves in Babylonian captivity were looking for scapegoats on which they could place the blame as to why they were in captivity. Their parents really had influenced them and the fact that they had gone down the same path as their parents was true; however, every one of them had a choice and every one of them knew the right thing to do.

Who's to Blame? – 18:1-4

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ² "What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children's teeth are set on edge'?" ³ "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore." ⁴ "Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die. Ezekiel 18:1-4 (NASB95)

Up until this time, there was a sense of national responsibility. If the people (individuals) were bad, the nation (everyone) suffered for it. People had a sense that to be good and do right would not make any difference in their lives because they might be doomed to suffer because of what their parents did. This was often merely a convenient excuse to justify bad behavior. This concept of individual responsibility was a deliberate and useful transition leading up to the introduction of the Gospel and the message that each of us is responsible before God and that each person must be born again in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Membership in a Christian family, being a citizen of a Christian nation or even having our name on the role of a Church does not justify us before God.

The change of perspective related to individual accountability versus ancestral accountability started in the period of and following the Babylonian captivity. The idea of ancestral accountability essentially said that if your parents and grandparents broke God's commandments and did not experience the consequences of their failure that the effects of such disobedience would eventually have to be paid by a future generation. I can see why the Israelites who were dispersed and the Jews who were taken as captives to Babylon would think that they were being punished unjustly. Their forefathers did the same kind of things they did and nothing as drastic as dispersion and exile happened to them. So why would they not think

that they were being punished for the sins of their forefathers?

So how do we answer the accusation (implied in the “grape” adage) that it seems God is unfair? Walvoord and Zuck state the following

“This proverb was false because it implied that God was unrighteous. God’s justice will guarantee that each guilty person will die for his own sin.”

The answer to what seems to be a dilemma is that each generation (or each individual) had enough sin that they could own as belonging to them that would justify God’s judgment. The fact that God was merciful to the previous generations and they did not experience dispersion or exile is not evidence that God is unfair. He can choose those to whom He will be merciful. This is similar to the parable that Jesus taught about the owner of a vineyard who hired workers to work for “a denarius a day” and he paid each worker the same, regardless of when they started to work. Those who started early in the day accused the owner of being unfair since the workers who started in the middle of the afternoon received the same pay. The owner could choose to whom he would be generous and his generosity did not mean he was unfair.

We might be tempted to refer to the comment stated after the second of the Ten Commandments that the Lord will “visit the iniquity” of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation. While the word translated “visit” can and has been translated as “punish,” the broader meaning is more that of “exerting influence” on future generations. We can see in our own time that the past bad choices of previous generations (and our own generation) in our government spending more than it could afford will eventually result in serious economic and financial consequences that will cause future generations to suffer. The “full cup principle” is still in effect; however, it is not an issue of God being fair because each guilty person will die for his own sin. Historical consequences may take time to develop; however, the eternal consequences are “sure” and will apply to all.

As a result of what these Israelites would learn from their experience of captivity, they would stop using that false proverb and realize that each person is directly responsible to God for his choices and cannot shift the blame to anyone else. This is the implication of the statement that “all souls are Mine.” We also see that the “law of sin and death” has not been repealed. While Ezekiel did not follow this bad news with the good news of the gospel message, we know that the penalty for our sin and sins was paid for us by the death of Christ.

What to Do? – 18:21-23

²¹ “But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ²² “All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. ²³ “Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” declares the Lord GOD, “rather than that he should turn from his ways and live? Ezekiel 18:21–23 (NASB95)

The underlying implication of the complaint of those who were carried away into exile was that God was not fair since they thought there was truth in saying that “future generations would be punished for the sins of past generations.” To show how erroneous that idea was, God had Ezekiel to assure them that not only would they NOT be punished for the sins of their fathers, they would not even be punished for their own sins IF they would genuinely repent and turn from all their sins. Just as the law of “sin and death” was still in effect, the law of “righteousness and life” was in operation.

The alternatives that we have are very simply these: Continue in sin and die is one alternative, the other alternative is to turn from sin and live our lives justly and righteously as defined in God’s word and live. If we will do that, then not only will we not be punished for past

sins (although there may be scars and losses that we can't recover), but God has promised that He will not remember them against us. This sounds very much like the message of prophecies of the gospel that assures us that God's salvation is so thorough it is "as if we had never sinned."

We've all heard the expression "revenge is sweet." Some think that this idea is imbedded in our genes and is a natural human response to being treated badly. That is probably true; however, it is not something that is part of our new nature that is patterned after the character of God. We find that God does not take any pleasure (or find anything sweet) in the demise of a wicked person. God's preference and what give Him pleasure is for the wicked to "repent and find life instead." This is the only alternative that agape love allows. If we truly love someone with a love that flows from grace, then only "what is best" is what we desire for that person.

What's Right? – 18:24-29

²⁴ "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die. ²⁵ "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? ²⁶ "When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. ²⁷ "Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. ²⁸ "Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ²⁹ "But the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right? Ezekiel 18:24–29 (NASB95)

If we read this passage with the idea of absolute righteousness (which is imputed by God to those who trust in Him) and absolute wickedness (which is the verdict of those who reject God and His salvation), then we will be very confused. We need to examine this passage in the context of the totality of this chapter and the false premise that these Jews were using to accuse God of being unfair. In this context, a "righteous" person would be someone from a good family who had been faithful to God's ways. A "wicked" person would be someone from a family with a history of rebellion.

If someone from a long history of faithful followers of God goes astray and lives a life of sin, thus turning away from his "righteousness" that was characteristic of his heritage, then he will not be able to rely on that Godly heritage to keep himself from the consequence of his own sins. The "law of sin and death" will come into effect and the outcome will be death.

On the other hand, if a person who comes from a heritage of notable sinners and all his family for generations had turned their collective backs on God and he turns away from such a life (his wickedness) to follow the Lord and be obedient to Him, then he will find life and he will not have any accountability for his ancestry. Then the "law of righteousness and life" would prevail.

These previous two paragraphs are accurate descriptions of the way God deals with individuals. You cannot find any fault in this way of dealing with people and yet the Jews in exile were saying that God was not fair and His ways were not right. Through Ezekiel, God refuted their claims and showed that His way which focuses on individual responsibility was and is right.

What Could Be? – 18:30-32

³⁰ "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct," declares the Lord GOD. "Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. ³¹ "Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord

GOD. "Therefore, repent and live." Ezekiel 18:30–32 (NASB95)

God had just told them that He holds each individual responsible for his own sins rather than having individuals being liable for the sins of their fathers. This does not mean that sons and daughters will not be affected and influenced by bad choices of their parents but that should not be seen as punishment but as simple "cause and effect." Since that is the case, then each person has responsibility to make the right choices by turning away from sin and transgressions and following God's ways.

The middle part of verse thirty sounds somewhat strange in that it literally told them to "repent and repent yourselves." Some see this as a call for individual repentance that needs to spill over to influence the entire present generation to also repent. While we will not be held accountable for the sins of our parent or the sins of our neighbors, we will certainly be impacted by them. If we want to see God's blessings come upon our nation, then not only do we (as God's people) need to do what is right, but those around us need to do likewise.

The ultimate solution to the problem of sin and our sinfulness is seen in verse 31 in which we see that a new heart and a new spirit will be needed for this to work. The old heart and old spirit are already essentially dead to the things of God and we need to be born again of the Spirit of God so that we can live. This is the desire of God for man and He wants it so much that He sent His uniquely begotten Son to come and show us the way of self-sacrificing love and to die for our sin so that we could have life everlasting.