

Introduction

I begin with two comments. A prominent psychologist said in an interview, "**All problems of children and teenagers originate with their parents.**" A troubled 62 year-old said to me, "**My therapist told me that I am the way I am because of my parents.**" Both comments reflect a widely held view. If we're troubled, it isn't our fault we are. It's our parents' fault. But according to our text, Ezekiel 18, God disagrees. He doesn't play the blame game and neither should we.

The Proverb

Ezekiel begins in verse 1 by claiming that what he's about to say isn't his word. It's God's. He's only saying what God told him to say.

God directs His word here to a proverb, "**The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge.**" Have you ever eaten something so sour, like Lemon Heads, that it set your teeth on edge? We all have, which assists us in interpreting the proverb. Eating sour grapes stands for doing foolish or sinful things. The teeth being set on edge stands for suffering the painful consequences of that. In this proverb, parents eat the sour grapes but it's their children's teeth that are set on edge. The meaning is that parents do foolish or sinful things and their children suffer the consequences.

There is some truth to the proverb. Children can suffer the physical or material consequences of their parents' foolishness or sin. The federal deficit is a classic example of what I mean. We talk about mortgaging our children's future. We say that *they* will suffer the painful consequences of *our* fiscal irresponsibility, and we're right. They will. So, there is some truth to the proverb in physical and material terms.

But look at verse 3 and how God's people, the Israelites, used it, or I should say *misused* it. The Babylonians had conquered their nation, Judah, destroyed its capital, Jerusalem, and then exiled all but the poorest of them to Babylon. That happened because the Israelites had

sinned against God. They had lived greedy, selfish, and immoral lives and had followed after false gods. The true God, as a result, used the Babylonians to judge and punish them.

They used this proverb though to excuse themselves. Their fathers sinned they claimed, and they were suffering the consequences because they did. **“We aren’t to blame for our problems,”** they argued, **“Our fathers are. They’re responsible not us. It’s their fault not ours.”**

Blaming Parents

The Israelites blamed their parents, and people are doing the same today. As one sociologist puts it, **“blame the parents”** has become a cottage industry in America. Psychologists, sociologists, social workers, legislators, educators, and the masses themselves claim that when people (minors or adults) are troubled, it’s their parents fault. Parents are being blamed for their children’s poor communication skills, tempers, violence, dysfunctional relationships, laziness, obesity, impulsiveness, depression, their rejection of Jesus, and much more.

One of the finest Christian couples I’ve ever known got a call from their adult daughter’s psychologist. He asked that they meet with him because, **“You seem to be the root of your daughter’s problems.”** They were flabbergasted. They didn’t know that their daughter had problems, or a psychologist, but agreed to meet. They found out when they did and I quote the mother, **“Apparently, our daughter’s unhappiness is our fault.”**

That **“blame the parents”** point of view is based on the **“blank slate”** theory of human beings. Dismissing other influences, it contends that people’s childhood experiences determine their character and conduct. So, if children turn out well, it’s only because their parents raised them well. If they turn out poorly, it’s only because their parents raised them poorly. The parents, not them, are primarily responsible for the person’s they’ve become and the lives they’re living.

That’s what people think and it’s detrimental that they do. The fact

is that blaming our parents harms us not helps us. Motivational speaker Craig Harper asserts just that: **“Just believe me when I tell you that being a Parent Blamer is a pointless, destructive, pathetic waste of your potential and emotional energy. And if you’re not careful, a waste of your life. It will destroy you from the inside out. When you’re still desperately holding on to emotional baggage from years ago, it’s YOU that’s the problem.”** His words are forceful and for the most part, right. Blaming parents isn’t helpful. It’s harmful.

Isn’t Biblical

It’s also unbiblical. Ezekiel 18 makes that perfectly clear.

It presents two scenarios. The first is in verses 5-13. There is a righteous father, a deeply spiritual and moral man, who has an unrighteous son, a perverse and abhorrent man. He’s as unrighteous as his father is righteous. The second scenario is in verses 14-18. This unrighteous son in turn has a son who sees his wickedness and turns from it. He chooses not to be what his father is, not to do what he does. He’s as righteous as his father is unrighteous.

Those are the scenarios and they teach us two defining truths.

The first is implied. There must be other factors, in addition to parents, that influence what children become and do. In his book *A Haven in a Heartless World*, acclaimed historian Christopher Lasch points out the failure of **“experts,”** and the undeserved guilt they place on parents. He also contends that there are societal factors that rival the impact of parents in directing the character and conduct of children. One of those, as we all know, is peer groups. Adolescents and teens today are generally not **“inner directed”** but **“other directed,”** meaning committed to fitting in to groups. The result is that their peer groups dramatically influence what they become and do. There are of course other significant factors including schooling, internet, television, sports, advertising, and genetics to name a few. What the two scenarios imply is true. There are other factors, in addition to parents, that influence what

children become and do.

The two scenarios in our text teach us a second truth. People are responsible for what they become and do, not their parents. Notice what verse 13 says about the unrighteous son of the righteous father, "**His blood will be on his own head.**" Also notice what verse 17 says about the righteous son of the unrighteous father, "**He will not die for his father's iniquity, he will surely live.**" Verse 20 extrapolates from that and declares, "**The righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.**"

Please grasp what that is. It's probably the strongest statement of individual responsibility in the Bible. It reveals God's point of view. Character and conduct are each person's responsibility. You and I are accountable for what we become and how we live. Don't misunderstand me. God does hold parents accountable for how they raise their children. He doesn't hold parents accountable for how their children turn out. He holds children accountable for that. If they turn out poorly, absent organic problems or devastating abuse, it's because they choose to. God doesn't blame parents for that. If they turn out well, it's because they choose to. God doesn't credit parents for that.

Accept Responsibility

So let's not play the blame game. Let's do what verses 30-32 command: "**repent,**" "**turn away from all your transgressions,**" "**cast away all transgressions,**" and "**make yourselves a new heart and spirit.**" Don't blame anyone or anything else, including parents, for what we are and do. Accept personal responsibility instead by doing two things.

First, say "**I am**" and replace excuse with admission. Who is to blame for my problem, weakness, or sin? I am. And I admit it. Let's have the courage to admit that it's our fault when it is. We can use the fourth and fifth steps of the AA Twelve Step Program as our guides here. We "**make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.**"

We also **“admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”** Those are helpful guides. We objectively and ruthlessly examine what’s wrong with our character and conduct and boldly acknowledge what we find.

We do a second thing. Say **“I will”** and replace passivity with action. The responsibility is on me. Consequently, the onus to do something about it is too. I intend to do whatever is necessary, therefore, to solve the problem, correct the weakness, or conquer the sin, and carry out my intention. That’s the thrust of that line in verse 31, **“make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.”**

Most of us have far more volitional strength than we realize. That’s why I was all for the *Just Say “No”* drug campaign back in the 90’s. Many thought it was simplistic and naïve. After all, we can’t just say **“no”** to our addiction, sex drive, childhood experiences, personality type, and so on. Or can we? Yes we can, more than we probably think. Even if we have genuine physiological or psychological pathologies, we’re still responsible for whatever constructive things we’re capable of doing. So we identify and do those things. We say **“I will.”** I will do them.

A 29 year-old named Gloria told her therapist: **“I’m here because I can’t take it anymore. I hate my life. I’m either angry or depressed. It’s all about my childhood. My parents separated when I was 5.”** And on she went, explaining all the things they did wrong. But with the therapist’s help, she now accepts responsibility for what she is and does. The therapist says it this way: **“She is considerably less attached to viewing her life through the lens of doom and failure caused by her parents. She has begun to take steps to get more for herself. She is able to see her identity in a new way and identify less and less as a victim.”** Gloria did two things in other words. She said **“I am”** and replaced excuse with admission. She also said **“I will”** and replaced passivity with action. If we’re still blaming our parents or anyone else, we need to do the same.

We usually can’t do that though until we do something else first.

Come to grips with our parents. Many people have bad or even horrible parents. Their parents didn't do right by them. They did in fact routinely wrong them over many years. So they must come to grips with them. To come to grips with them means to honor them as the Fifth of the Ten Commandments commands.

Dallas Willard explains how to do that in *The Divine Conspiracy*. First, be honest about the bad character and conduct of our parents. Don't deny that or excuse it. Admit it. See them as they really are. Second, be honest about our feelings and actions toward them. If we hate or resent them or have acted wrongly toward them, acknowledge that. Third, repent of our sinful feelings and actions toward them. Ask God for forgiveness first of all and them, if it's beneficial, second of all. Fourth, don't get caught up in old damaging patterns of interaction with them. Don't try to make them understand, to have the last word, to prove that we're right, and so on. And finally, fifth, forgive them. Have pity on them and don't make them suffer or pay for wronging us.

Honoring bad parents is no small task. It requires a power that is beyond us. We get that that power by arranging our affairs around engaging Jesus and His kingdom at hand. Doing so incorporates us now into His eternal life, which heals all wounds, including those caused by our parents. We're then able to surrender this whole matter of parents to Him to work out as He wills. Those with bad parents usually won't become whole persons until they do that. So, let's do it, going to well-established friends of Jesus, if necessary, for assistance and prayer.

Conclusion

I leave you in closing with a Greek and then a French proverb. **"Excuse is a tyrant."** That means it runs and ruins our lives. And **"Excusing a fault doubles it."** That means excuse makes us worse not better. So, say **"I am"** and replace excuse with admission. Also say **"I will"** and replace passivity with action. Don't play the blame game!