

## Introduction

When I lived in Barberton years ago, a fine Christian I knew got a call from her adult daughter psychologist. He asked that her husband and she meet with him and her because and I quote him, **"You seem to be the basic cause of your daughter's problems."** They didn't even know their daughter had problems, or a psychologist, but agreed to meet. What they found out in doing so was, and I quote her, **"We're to blame, apparently, for our daughter being so messed up."**

But the text I read earlier, Ezekiel 18, disagrees. It teaches that they weren't to blame for their daughter being messed up; she was. It teaches that the buck stops here and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn there in your Bibles please.

## The Proverb

In verse 1, Ezekiel claims that what he's about to say in chapter 18 isn't his word. It's God's. He Himself told him to say it.

God begins in verse 2 with a proverb. We ourselves use proverbs to express truths like **"You can lead a person to wisdom but you can't make him think"** or **"The sooner you fall behind, the more time you'll have to catch up."** The ancients did the same thing and that's what we have here in verse 2, 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 sets your teeth on edge? That's what this proverb is about. It says that the fathers eat the sour grapes but the children's teeth are set on edge.

It's a catchy proverb and we need to interpret it. Eating sour grapes stands for doing sinful or foolish things. The teeth set on edge stands for suffering the painful consequences of those things being done. In this case, it's the parents who eat the sour grapes and their children whose teeth are set on edge. The parents do the sinful or foolish things. The children suffer the painful consequences of those things being done.

There is a kernel of truth to that proverb. Take the federal deficit, for instance. It's a hot issue and I want you to notice the terms in which we frame it. We talk about mortgaging our children's future. We talk about borrowing from the next generation. We're concerned about the consequences that our runaway spending is going to have on our children and grandchildren. Our generation is being utterly irresponsible and foolish and we know that they're going to suffer the painful consequences of that. So, there is some truth to the proverb.

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 their 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 followed after false gods. The true God, as a result, used the Babylonians to judge and punish them.

But notice what they did. They used this proverb to excuse themselves. Their fathers sinned, they claimed, and they were suffering the consequences. We aren't to blame for our problems, they argued. Our fathers are. They're the ones who are responsible for this, not us. It's their fault, not ours.

### **Pass the Buck**

The Israelites passed the buck, in other words, and you know what, we're doing the same today, more so than ever. Let me explain.

Sigmund Freud was the Father of Psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis says that our experiences in the early stages of our development determine who we are and what we do. John Watson and B.F. Skinner were the Fathers of Behaviorism. Behaviorism says that biological, genetic, and environmental factors determine who we are and what we do. Psychoanalysis and behaviorism are different theories but have this in common. They're deterministic. They teach that internal and external factors beyond our control determine who we are and what we do.

This isn't a psychology class but you need to know that if you want to understand what's going on around you. Psychoanalysis and behaviorism have profoundly influenced the way our culture and its people think. What they think, generally, is this. First, we as individuals aren't free. And second, because we aren't free, we aren't responsible. It isn't our fault that we are who we are and do what we do. It's someone or something else's.

A newspaper article I read titled "Blame Game" summarizes it well: **"America, the land of the free: guilt free, fault free, responsibility free. Blame you, blame them, blame everyone, but don't blame me. I'm just a victim."** The author cites a case in point. An FBI agent was fired for stealing funds, which he subsequently lost gambling. But he sued and won his job back. The judge ruled that he was the victim of compulsive gambling and thus, not responsible for what he did.

You get my point. We live in a cultural climate that encourages us to think we aren't free and thus aren't responsible. Author Rousas Russhoony captures the essence of this. He writes, **"The cult of victimization is perhaps the most popular religion of our time."** It's a radical statement but pretty much true. People won't accept responsibility for who they are and what they do. They're almost religious in passing the buck to someone or something else.

### **The Buck Stops Here**

But it's time that they and we stop it. It's well known that President Harry Truman kept a little sign on his desk that said, **"The buck stops here."** That was his point of view and, according to chapter 18, it should be ours as well.

God gives us two scenarios here. The first is in verses 5-13. There is a righteous father. Verses 5-9 describe him. He's a deeply spiritual and moral man, the kind everyone wants to have as a father. But sadly, he has an unrighteous son. Verses 10-13 describe him. He's abhorrent and perverse. He's as unrighteous as his father is righteous. The second

scenario is in verses 14-18. The unrighteous son in turn has a son. This son sees his father's wickedness and turns from it. He decides not to be what his father was, not to do what he did. He's as righteous as his father is unrighteous.

Those scenarios speak powerfully to parents and children on this Father's Day. I've known and counseled so many Christian parents over the years who were wracked with guilt. Their children turned out poorly, and they wondered what they did wrong as a result. It was their fault, they thought, that their children were what they were or did what they did. I heard a psychologist on TV affirm that. He said, "**When kids go wrong, it's the parents' fault.**" So many parents believe that and are guilt-ridden because they do.

But it isn't their fault. Don't get me wrong. Most of us made some mistakes when our adult children were growing up. And we'd do some things differently if we had it to do all over again. I know I would. But at the same time, what Tony Campolo says in his book *Growing Up in America* is true. Parents get far too much blame when their children turn out poorly and far too much credit when they turn out well.

God and Ezekiel agree. Notice what verse 13 says about the unrighteous son of the righteous father, "**his blood will be on his own head.**" Also 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 more broadly declares, "**the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.**" That is one of the strongest statements of individual responsibility in the Bible.

God's point is simple and clear. Character and conduct are each person's responsibility. You and I are accountable for what we become and do. God won't let us play the blame game. It isn't anyone or anything else's fault that I've become or done wrong. It's my fault. I've become and done what I've chosen to, and thus, the buck stops here, with me – and with each of you.

Many years ago, in Akron, I counseled a young adult whose father had been and still was an angry and abusive man. I encouraged him of course to reject his father's way and to become the kind of husband and father Jesus wanted him to be. He didn't though. He became the same kind of man that his father was instead. It dripped with irony in fact. He became just like the man he hated so much. And he was responsible that he did. Certainly, he was disadvantaged to have a father like that and God will judge his father for it. But it's no excuse. According to chapter 18, it's his fault, not his father's, that he became the person he became.

It only goes to show you. Character and conduct are each person's responsibility. The buck stops here, with you and me.

### **What to Do**

And we should respond appropriately when it does. We see that in verses 30-32. They exhort us to "repent," "turn away from all your transgressions," "cast away all transgressions, and "make yourselves a new heart and spirit." Two actions are inherent in those exhortations.

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. The fourth and fifth steps of the AA Twelve Step Program are our guides here. Step #4 - "make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." Step #5 - "admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." Those are outstanding guides. We must objectively and ruthlessly examine what's wrong with our character and conduct and boldly acknowledge what we find.

The second action is this. Say "I will" and replace passivity with action. The responsibility is on me. Consequently, the onus to do something about it is too. So I intend to do whatever is necessary to solve the problem, correct the weakness, or overcome the sin and carry out my intention. That's the thrust of that line in verse 31, "**make**

**yourself a new heart and a new spirit.**" Most people have far more volitional strength than they realize. That's why I was all for that *Just Say "No"* drug campaign back in the 90's. Many in our culture of victimization 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 often than we probably think. Even when people have legitimate physiological or psychological pathologies, they're responsible for whatever constructive things they're capable of doing. So they need to identify and do those things. They and we need to say "I will."

I read about a Christian who was 40 pounds overweight. For years, he defined his problem in terms of his family's genetic disposition to obesity and hectic schedule, which prevented him from exercising. It wasn't his fault, in other words, and so, he didn't do anything about it. But he eventually came to replace excuse with admission. His primary problem wasn't disposition or schedule, he confessed, but his own lack of will power. He then replaced passivity with action. He intended not to overeat and carried out his intention. He tells about a little episode in that regard. He was thoughtlessly dishing up a second helping of a casserole, one of those with the three essential food groups – fat, salt, and cholesterol. Anyway, his son, who knew he was trying to lose weight, spoke up and said, **"Dad, I don't think you want to do that? You're right,"** he said, and put down the spoon. What's instructive is his analysis of what occurred, **"A skirmish with gluttony was simply and quietly defeated – without drama or heroic will power."**

## **Conclusion**

I leave you in closing with a Greek and then a French proverb. **"Excuse is a tyrant."** It will run and ruin our lives. And **"Excusing a fault doubles it."** Excuses make things worse. So, say "I am" and replace excuse with admission. And say "I will" and replace passivity with action. Believe and act, in other words, like "the buck stops here."