



Spiritual Responsibility

Ezekiel 18:1-2 & 25-32

William F. Schnell

October 1, 2017

Fuddy Duddy alert. I love the old comedy routines of Abbot and Costello, Laurel and Hardy and the like. I howl watching those shows. They aren't crude and coarse. They aren't thinly-veiled political commentary of one persuasion or another. They aren't rude to this group of people or that. They are just funny. And their humor is timeless. A common refrain in Laurel and Hardy shows is when they find themselves in terrible circumstances and Oliver Hardy looks at Stanley Laurel and says: "Here's another fine mess you've gotten us into." For Hardy it always seems to be Laurel's fault somehow.

We love to blame the other for our problems. My son often says that he wishes he was raised when I was raised. He seems to long for the good old days of Ozzie & Harriet and Leave it to Beaver. The world was simpler then and less fraught with problems common to this day. Little did I know that this was a commentary on how bad my generation has messed up what was handed to us by the Greatest Generation. I got that message while overhearing him talk with some of his millennial pals. Believe me; among that generation my generation doesn't look so good. We've run up debt. We've messed up the environment. Good luck with Social Security by the time they retire. The nation is as divided as the world. It's a mess!

My first reaction, as a Boomer, is to get a little defensive. But then I think back on how well my generation navigated the rebellious years. Man, we did rebellion like no other generation. If the old man had short hair, mine was as long as mom's. They wore suits. We wore tie dye. Easy for them to involve us in the Vietnam War. They liked happy hour, and we liked partying too--just differently. Yes indeed, my generation has no business taking issue with Millennial angst. Like most everything else they do that bugs us, it's not half as bad as what we did to bug the Greatest Generation. Besides, someday a new generation will arise to judge the millennials for how they messed up the world. It's what we do. We blame others.

We do it because it distracts us from taking a good, hard look at ourselves. It makes it easy to avoid taking any personal responsibility for ourselves. The title of our message for today is "Spiritual Responsibility." Assuming responsibility for ourselves is a spiritual issue. That is why the Bible calls us to confess our sins and to turn away from them and to make an amendment of our lives in keeping with God's will and ways. Every time we come to the Lord's Table we offer a prayer of confession (today's is borrowed

from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer). The Bible and the Church and its liturgy do not call us to confess somebody else's sins and to seek divine forgiveness for them. Why, if we had a confessional here I would be spending all my time listening to you confess the sins of everybody else. We've all got time for that. We've all got time for being judgmental and, its corollary, being self-righteous. The Pharisees certainly had time to judge God when he was born into our world.

God has something else in mind for his people and we are going to learn what that is as we look to the Old Testament prophetic book of Ezekiel. Our text begins: *The word of the Lord came to me: "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? As surely as I live," declares the Lord, "you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel"* (Verses 1-2). Who are "you people"? They are the Jewish Exiles who have been forcefully relocated to Babylon as a slave race. The Jewish homeland was overrun and laid waste. There were several deportations to allow for all these people to be assimilated as newly minted slaves into Babylonian society. Among the first was the deposed king and other rulers, rich folk and other prominent people. Also among them was the prophet Ezekiel.

Imagine their fall from being the crème de la cream of a free society to slaves in a foreign land. Imagine the despair. Imagine the need to place blame. There was a proverbial refrain going around among the exiles: *"The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."* Sweet, ripe grapes are nodules of nectar. Sour grapes set your teeth on edge. I have this rare ability to eat sour stuff, like a slice of lemon, with absolutely no facial indication that it is sour. I used to do it in college and other people who watched would pucker their lips. In our text the fathers eat sour grapes but it is their children's teeth which are set on edge. In other words, the previous generation must have really screwed up to have allowed the Babylonians to defeat them. In still other words, the exiles are saying to those who have gone before, "Here's another fine mess you've gotten us into." They're the ones to blame.

And there is a kernel of truth in this. The previous generations had turned away from God so that the latter could no longer protect and provide for the former. God himself had warned against this in the 10 Commandments saying: *"I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me..."* (Exodus 20:5). And in our own day we see this principle operating where children born into low income households have a much, much greater chance of remaining poor, committing crimes, abusing drugs and alcohol and the like. On the other extreme, children born to privileged classes tend later to be more highly educated, much better employed and compensated, less criminal in behavior and more stable in family relationships.

But there are exceptions. JD Vance, author of the bestseller Hillbilly Elegy, came up in a low income, drug addled, and disintegrating family in Middletown, Ohio to graduate from Yale Law School. You may have seen him recently as a Republican contributor on CNN. JD Vance defied the prevailing norms and made something of himself through

some fortuitous circumstances and by the grace of God. By the same token, there are people born with every head start imaginable who somehow seem to blow it big time. I will leave it to you to come up with examples of that, for they are not hard to be found.

So, while it is true that parents can certainly hamstring their children by giving them seemingly insurmountable obstacles to overcome in growing up as well-integrated individuals; or parents can bless their children by giving them the tools they need to succeed in life; each person ultimately has the responsibility to make right choices for themselves. We may rightfully blame others for a raw deal, but we cannot blame them for our failures in life.

This is what the Lord is saying to his people through the prophet Ezekiel as they go about bemoaning their fate by blaming the previous generations with a sour grapes proverb. *“As surely as I live declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die”* (Verse 4). There follows a series of illustrations where a righteous man has an unrighteous son. The righteous father will live and his unrighteous son will die. But if the unrighteous son, before he dies, has a righteous son, that son will live. Further, if a righteous person becomes corrupted, that person will die. But if an unrighteous person repents, that person will live.

Living and dying here are simplified terms here for circumstances that either bless our lives or curse them—that are either self-improving or self-destructive. The point is that each one of us, despite the hand we have been dealt, have the choice to improve our lot in life or to squander the gift of life we have been given. *“Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways,” declares the Sovereign Lord. “Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!”* (Verses 30-32).

God is not some cosmic child abuser who delights in torturing his children. God desires the salvation of all his children, and provides a way out for each one. No matter what hand we have been dealt in life, no matter how big a mess we have made of things, no matter how long we have been exiled from the Promised Land God offers a way back. It is called repentance. It is admitting that we are human and not perfect. It is acknowledging our sins and failings and faults. It is seeking forgiveness, mercy and a brand new start. It is asking for divine help and guidance in making a needful amendment of our lives.

Repent and live! God says to the exiles and he says to us. The exiles heeded his advice and God opened a way for them to leave the land of bondage and return to the land of promise. They rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and its temple, and they rebuilt their lives as well. Will we take spiritual responsibility for ourselves and be like that

generation of God's people, or will we be like the previous generation that avoided taking spiritual responsibility by blaming others for their problems and issues?

The answer will be crystal clear by whether we are self-righteous and judgmental of others—blaming everybody but ourselves; or whether we are repentant and seeking divine help in making needful amendment of our lives—seeking salvation in other words. A table has been set for some of us today. It has not been set for those who examine everyone else but themselves for shortcomings. It has been set for those who are willing to examine themselves—who know what they are and what they need. It is set for those willing to accept spiritual responsibility for themselves.