

# WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE? – EZEKIEL 18:1-4, 25-32

PASTOR COLIN RIEKE ~ OCTOBER 19, 2014

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 Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.” “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die. Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? 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!”



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

The last couple years have not been good for NCAA football programs. In 2010 and 2011, the USC Trojans and the Ohio State Buckeyes were handed down harsh penalties resulting in lost revenue and prestige because a few of their players forfeited their amateur eligibility and took unauthorized benefits. But the players who took those benefits were not the ones who bore the brunt of the punishment, instead it was the future classes that had to suffer. Many see this as unfair, punishing players who had nothing to do with the infraction. Because WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE?

It’s not just NCAA sports where you see this happening. You can see this happening at school, in the military, at work, in every facet of our life, where people are enduring the punishment for other people’s transgressions. It doesn’t seem fair, and everyone wants to know WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE?

This was the situation which the Israelites found themselves in during the time that Ezekiel is prophesying. They found themselves saying the parable, “**The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.**” This parable they quoted reflects the idea that it was the Israelites’ fathers’ faults that they had ended up in Babylon. It was not this generation of Israelites who prostrated themselves to idols and pagan worship, why do they have to suffer the punishment of the exile?

We can find ourselves asking the same thing with the different events which take place in our lives. And we can always find someone else to blame for whatever situation we have gotten ourselves into. Maybe it’s by blaming our brother for coercing us to take cookies from the cookie jar. Maybe it’s blaming our parents for why our life is so messed up. The attitude has not changed from Adam and Eve,

to Ezekiel's day, to our day today. But the important point God brings up through the prophet Ezekiel is WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE?

1. For our guilt?
2. For our innocence?

(1)

The Israelites suffered from an ideology that we suffer from today, one that I will call progressivism. Each generation feels like they are an improvement upon the last. This is at least what the Israelites who had been taken to Babylon thought. Citing the parable they meant to say King Manasseh before them committed the detestable sins, sins that our fathers were all too happy to go along with. We haven't been perfect, but we have had to bear the brunt of God's punishment for it. Life's not fair, it's them WHO ARE ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE.

It didn't take God long to correct this assumption by the Israelites. He sent the prophet Ezekiel, who had been taken into captivity in Babylon with them to say to them, "**Every living soul belongs to me, and the soul who sins is the one who will die.**" God didn't want the Israelites making broad sweeping generalities about the horrors of the previous generation and the greatness of the current one. God doesn't give out a generational grade on who goes to heaven and who doesn't, he breaks it down to the individual. God wanted the Israelites not to find security in the group, but to examine their own lives (like we heard about in 2 Corinthians this morning) and their own sins. Because individuals will not be ultimately responsible for the sins of others, but for their own sins. The Israelites in Babylon WERE ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for their own guilt.

Ezekiel used a parable to explain this point very clearly. The parable eclipses the central verses of the chapter which we passed over in our first lesson. This parable is a three generational story. In the first generation, the father does what is right, he does not submit himself to idols, he is generous, he is faithful. This man will live. Then he has a son who is not like him at all. He does what isn't right, he does submit himself to idols, he isn't generous he isn't faithful. This man will die for his sins. But then there's the third generation, the grandson. The grandson does what is right, he doesn't submit himself to idols, he is generous, he is faithful. This man will live. God is saying, how much more just can you get. Each man is ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for their own actions.

And yet, just like the parable of the workers in the vineyard from last week, the Israelites can do nothing but complain about the injustice they perceive. So God has to say, "**Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?**" If the Israelites lined up their own lives with God's standard, instead of lining their own lives up against others, it would be very clear whose ways are right and whose ways are wrong. And it was the Israelites WHO WERE ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for their own guilt.

A couple hundred years later you have the same argument coming before Jesus. The Pharisees were a group of religious leaders who thought of themselves as much higher than everyone else. From the parable Jesus told, he made it clear to them, it isn't those who think themselves better that God wants, but those who actually go and do what God wants. And how true is that for us as well. The sinful nature that dwelt within the Jews of Ezekiel's and Jesus' day dwells within each of us today. It doesn't matter if we have been life-long believers or recent converts. The sinful nature wants to put others down and

build ourselves up. The sinful nature which tells us that I'm much better than so many other people. It is also the sinful nature that convinces us that it isn't our fault for the mistakes we have made, the people we've hurt, the actions we have done.

WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for our guilt? We are, because we are the ones who have offended God. We are the ones who have turned away from him, and our ways are unjust. God is not some creation of the human mind which can be manipulated to our own pleasure and will. We are his creation and subject to him. And so if there's a disagreement between you and God, guess who's wrong? If there's a disagreement between you and the Bible, guess who's wrong? And if there's a disagreement between you and a faithful preacher of God's Word, guess who's wrong?

We have no one to blame for our condition, only ourselves. We can complain all we want about how unfair it is that God judges us according to a perfect standard we can never meet, but that cry will fall upon deaf ears. Instead we should take to heart the words of our God to "**repent and live.**" It's something that we have heard as believers many times. But we hear it as believers many times because it is an ongoing process. The first thesis Martin Luther pounded on the door to spark the Reformation was that the whole life of a believer is to be one of repentance. You can't just repent once and be done, it is a whole life process.

(2)

This is what God is saying through the prophet Ezekiel. "**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.**" God's basic warning here is for believers and unbelievers alike. He doesn't want anyone to perish – something that will happen because of our sin, so he wants us to turn away from our sin for our own good. He doesn't want sin to be our downfall. But it isn't because we repent of our sins that we are saved, it who we turn to – Jesus.

Just like we answered WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for our guilt, we also ask, WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for our innocence? You would be hard pressed to find any Christian church who would not answer with "Jesus." Jesus is ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for our innocence. After all, he was the one who lived the perfect life, he was the one who died the innocent death on the cross. 2 Corinthians confesses, "**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might have the righteousness of God.**"

But just as important as WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for our innocence, is how do we obtain this innocence. And this is a question where it is important to look at all of Scripture to see what God says. You have the verse where God says to obtain this innocence, you need to "**get a new heart and a new spirit.**" Many have taken this to mean, you have to start acting like a Christian, you have to turn your life over to God, you have to accept Jesus into your hearts and lives. Unfortunately, this view leans very heavy on the individual, it leans very hard on feelings and emotions. Because even after you are a Christian, you will face highs and lows, you will feel good one day and bad the next. And viewing your Christianity on how you feel a particular day can be disheartening.

This was the burden that hung over Martin Luther early in his life. Until he came to the truth of the gospel. The truth of the gospel isn't just that Jesus lived and died for us, but that he also creates this

new heart and new spirit with us. WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for our innocence? It's Jesus. Our innocence comes from Jesus as well. We see this shown just a few chapters later in Ezekiel, God says, **"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."**

Why then does Ezekiel say right here that *WE* must do the turning? It's what scholars have called the gospel imperative. An imperative is a command someone gives, in this case it is God. And when God gives a command, he is not just expecting us to follow it, he gives us the power to follow it. A perfect example is found when Jesus rose his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. He said, **"Lazarus, get up!"** Another imperative, but Jesus wasn't expecting Lazarus to get up on his own, but only by the power behind those words. The same thing that Jesus did for Lazarus, is what he has done for each one of us spiritually. He has given us a new heart and put a new spirit in us.

While we are here on this earth, that new heart and spirit will be constantly battling against the old sinful nature. This is what causes the highs and lows, the times when we feel strong and the times when we feel weak. But that struggle is not in and of itself evidence that your faith is strong or weak, that is evidence that faith is there. It is evidence that God has put a new heart and new spirit in you.

We no longer have to worry about anything that we have done, but focus on what Christ has done. Our actions as Christians are no longer viewed as a verification for being Christian, but as a result of it. As a result of being Christian, we will want to share what we know with others, this is just one reason we are hosting a grand opening at Grace-Vail next weekend, this is one reason why Grace has become one church at four sites. This is one reason why we encourage our members to live out their Christian lives. So that we can remind people that it's not about what's fair and what's not fair. It's about telling people WHO IS ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE for our innocence. To God be the glory. Amen!