

Pastor Daniel Waldschmidt¹ – Ezekiel 18:1-4; 21-32 – October 11th, 2020 – St. John’s Lutheran Church

One thing I’ve noticed about myself is that I sometimes have the tendency to blame someone or something else for my problems. For example, if I don’t get a project done I might say, “Well, there are so many demands on my time.” But the truth is, there aren’t that many demands on my time and sometimes I’m not so good at managing my time. So my blaming somebody or something else is just a way of avoiding the real issue which is my management of time.

I’ll give you another example. Over the years my wife and I have discovered that when we have an argument about something, we are both partly right and partly wrong. But I tend to focus on the part where I’m a little bit right. Even if I can see that the argument is partly my fault, I tend to downplay that and even justify that. Since I’m partly right, the argument must not really be my fault.

Those are just a few examples of how I tend to blame others for my problems. No matter what goes wrong in any avenue of life, I can find an angle, I can find an explanation in which I’m not really to blame.

Do you have the same tendency that I do? Do you have the tendency to transfer the blame to somebody else? Do you have the tendency to blame others for your problems? If so, who do you tend to blame for the problems in your life?

Maybe your tendency is to blame your coworkers. If something goes wrong at work, you tell yourself that it is all their fault. You might tell yourself that things would be going much better around here if *they* weren’t so hard to work with. Maybe you’ve even started to justify being lazy at work. You might reason to yourself, “If they don’t do their job, why should I?” And if you were confronted about that your answer would probably center around *them*. We have the tendency to blame others.

Or maybe you have the tendency to blame your family at various levels. Maybe you’re constantly feuding with your siblings and you see them as the source of all your troubles. Or you might say to yourself, “The reason I’m not happy is because my kids take up all of my time and all of my energy.” Or “My spouse is constantly nagging me.” We have a lot of people whom we blame, don’t we?

In our passage for today, the Old Testament Israelites were doing the same thing that we do. They were blaming others for their problems. The Israelites blamed their parents. You see the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. And they said to themselves, the reason we are here in Babylon is because our parents worshiped idols. Our parents sinned and we are getting punished for it. They even had a proverb to express this thought. The proverb went like this: “**The parents eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge**” (Ezekiel 18:2).² What does that mean? Scholars explain that the teeth being set on edge could mean that you have a sour taste in

¹ I got a lot of help for this sermon from Iain Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

² All Scripture quotations taken from the NIV.

your mouth.³ So the parents eat sour grapes and the children get a bad taste in their mouth. It means that the children are experiencing the consequences of what the parents did. That would obviously be unfair. If you eat sour grapes, you should have a bad taste in your mouth, not your kids. And that was the Israelites' point. They were saying, "Our parents worshiped idols and we are here in exile. Our parents sinned and we are being punished for it."

But what obvious fact were they overlooking? They were overlooking the fact that, just like their parents, they too worshipped idols. They too oppressed the poor. They too committed adultery. They too refused to help their neighbor in need. You see the problem with blaming others is that it helps us overlook our sin. Blaming others can even be a tool that we use to help us avoiding facing our own faults. You see blaming others is really a safety mechanism. Because if we put the spotlight on others, then that means the spotlight won't be put on me.

And it's important that we put the spotlight on our own faults. Not just because it will help you get along with your coworkers. And not just because it will help you have a better marriage. We need to put the spotlight on our own faults because it is a matter of eternal life or death. It's true that other people are sinful, but their sins will not send you to hell. Yours on the other hand will, unless you repent of them. God says, "**The one who sins is the one who will die**" (Ezekiel 18:4).

What sins do you need to repent of? What sins do you allow to go unchecked in your life? What sins do you explain away or blame others for? Maybe it's the sin of anger. Or maybe it's the sin of gossip. Maybe the images that you let come through your computer screen or your TV are not God-pleasing. Or maybe the success that you would like to have or the things that you would like to own have become a modern day idol for you. Think about your own life. What do you need to turn from?

Instead of blaming others, we should put the spotlight on ourselves. But when we put the spotlight on ourselves, we might face another problem, which is really the ultimate problem. If it's really true that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Consider for a moment that that's really true and not just something preachers say. If it's really true that "**the one who sins is the one who will die**" (18:4), then how can I live (Ezekiel 33:10)?

The Good News is that God does not want us to die. He says, "**I take no pleasure in the death of anyone**" (Ezekiel 18:32). God doesn't want us to die. Instead, his deep desire is that we *live*. He wants us to live so badly that he sent his own Son to die so that we might live. And when he tells us to turn from our sin it's because he doesn't want us to die. He wants us to live. God wants to give us something so much better than sin could ever give us. He wants to give us life. So whatever sin you are caught in. Leave it behind. Repent and live!

But sometimes we might feel caught in our past. We can feel caught in our past in several ways. We might feel caught in the guilt of our past. But Ezekiel says that when we truly repent, and that true repentance will be shown in a change of actions, when we truly repent, God will not

³ Donna Lee Petter, Notes on Ezekiel in the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015) p. 1629

remember our past sins against us. It says, **“None of the sins they have committed will be remembered against them” (Ezekiel 18:22)**. Because Jesus paid for your sins, when you repent of your sins, God remembers your sins no more. You don’t have to be stuck in past guilt. Jesus took it all away.

But there might be another way that you might feel stuck in your past. You might feel like, “I can’t turn away from this sin. This is the way I have always been. This is way I’ll always have to be.” But that’s not true. You’re not on a one-way train that you can’t turn around. You’re in a car. And you can turn around. You can turn away from sin and do what is just and right. Not by your own power of course, but by God’s power.

Think of the son in Jesus’ parable for today (Matthew 21:28-32). The father told him to go work in the vineyard, but he refused. He said, “I will not.” But later he changed his mind and went. (Matthew 21:29) You see when it comes to life with God, the most important thing is not how you start. It’s how you finish. And it works both ways. Ezekiel says that if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and lives a life of wickedness, then he will die (18:24, 26). But if a wicked person turns from his wickedness and does what is right, then he will live (18:21, 27).

When it comes to life with God, the most important thing is not how you start, but how you finish. Please do not misunderstand, I do not mean that it’s OK to live a life of wickedness now because you can just repent later. Instead my point and Ezekiel’s point is that if you have lived a righteous life so far, do not turn away from that, keep doing what is right. And if you’ve lived a wicked life so far, it’s not too late to turn around and do what is just and right and live. Of course this side of heaven we are not going to perfect. But Ezekiel is talking about the overall pattern of your life, the deeds that reflect your heart.⁴

You see God’s forgiveness gives us a new heart. Ezekiel says, **“Get a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:31)**. This idea of a new heart comes up several times in Ezekiel. Back in chapter 11, God says, **“I will remove from them a heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh” (11:19)** And in Ezekiel 36 God says, **“I will give you a new heart” (Ezekiel 36:26)**. Through the good news of Jesus God gives us a new heart, a heart that beats with eternal life. And with this new heart, we can see things differently. We don’t need to blame others, because we have squarely faced our own faults, and we’ve found forgiveness at the cross. We don’t need to transfer our guilt to others because our guilt has already been transferred to Jesus. And so we can go to work and we can live in our marriages with a new heart, a heart that’s not afraid to own up to our own faults, a heart that’s eager to do what is just and right, a heart that beats with love for the Savior and love for our neighbor. We can *live*, both now and forever. Amen.

⁴ I owe this thought to Paul Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, The Old Testament Vol. II, The Poetical and Prophetical Books (St. Louis: Concordia, 1924), 541.