

Who's Responsible Ezekiel 18:1-4, 14-20

In our family there is a figure I have never met but he is responsible for nearly every bad thing that happens in our house. Someone leaves a half-eaten plate of food on our bed or borrows my leather baseball glove and leaves it out in yard overnight when the sprinklers ran or accidentally deleted my sermon from the home computer because they are watching Youtube. So, I will quiz our children directly about who committed this grievous offense. The answer always names the same person: "Not me." And by the way "Not me" doesn't do his fair share of the chores either because I'll often ask "Whose turn is it to feed the dog?" or "Who is supposed to unload the dishwasher?" And the kids will respond again, "Not me."

Now I have never met "Not me." I don't where he is from. I have never even seen "Not me." But I know he's real because his name comes up so often and he has destroyed so much around our house.

Of course, "Not me" has been around for a long time. The first recorded sighting of "Not me" was in Genesis. In Genesis Chapter 4 we are taught that a man named Cain was angry with his brother named Abel. Cain killed his brother when they were out working in the field. The Lord came to Cain after the murder and said, "Where is Abel your brother?" And Cain replied, "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?" Translation: "Not me."

And this is usually our first instinct to the question, "Who's responsible? Who's to blame?"

"Not me."

We want to deflect the blame. We don't want to show any kind of ownership or fault or own any kind of blame at all. We want the long, crooked figure of guilt pointed somewhere else.

"Who, me? I'm just trying to live my life?"

"What has that to do with me?"

"Well, I'm not responsible."

In our culture's discussions about justice one of the biggest questions is how do we address people who don't have as much opportunity as we do or face disadvantages in the schools they attend or the neighborhoods where they grow up, their family background or because of they have only known poverty? What do we do when the wheels of justice turn unfairly?

Who is responsible when people are discriminated against because of who God made them to be or where they come from? And even when we look back in our history and see things like slavery and Jim Crow, redlining that kept people of particular races out of certain neighborhoods, government run schools that tried to strip Native Americans of all their cultural identity, what is our responsibility today? How do we deal with man's inhumanity to man that is present everywhere sinful human beings have drawn a breath?

When people say who is going to do something, who's responsible, as followers of Jesus do we say, "Not me" or would Jesus have us say and do something else?

Let me briefly remind us how we are saying the Bible defines justice—a word with deep Biblical roots. It is the Hebrew word, “*mishpat*.” Over a hundred times in the Old Testament the word justice (*mishpat*) is joined with the word for righteousness. They go together. They cannot be separated. Righteousness is best understood as a right relationship with God and justice is understood as having a right relationship with others. So, righteousness is a vertical idea, how well do we allow God to reach down to us and how we intentionally reach up to Him. Justice is a horizontal—how do we reach out to others beside us. Just think of the arms of the cross that point up toward heaven and out toward earth. This joining of justice and righteousness aligns with what Jesus called the greatest commandment:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

Mark 12:30-31

Justice is having right relationships with others which means loving our neighbor as ourselves, taking the priority we normally have for our own interest, our prosperity, well-being and success and directing toward someone else.

Today we ask, how does the Biblical command to do justice, to love our neighbor as ourselves make us responsible.

To understand what justice looks like we must understand the difference between responsibility and blame because they are two very different things. And one of Satan’s tricks is to confuse blame and responsibility. Responsibility means we are obligated to do something. Blame means it’s our fault.

As we think about justice this is important distinction because there is a lot of injustice—both currently and historically—which we might, as followers of Jesus Christ, be responsible to address—but we may not be to blame. We may not be at fault.

Can we be blamed, are we ever at fault for someone else’s sin? Here is what the Bible says:

Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise: he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor’s wife, does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father’s iniquity; he shall surely live. As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

Ezekiel 18:14-18, 20

Ezekiel goes lays out a scenario where a father sins terribly. He acts unjustly—he extorts others, robs his neighbor and does no good among his people at all. His son, on the other hand, acts righteously and justly—he loves God with all his heart, mind and strength and his neighbor as himself. He doesn't worship idols, doesn't oppress anyone, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked. He loans money without charging interest and he doesn't lie or covet and he is faithful to his wife. He repents of the life his father had. We see this kind of thing often in Scripture especially with Israel's kings. More than once, Israel had a king who did what was evil in the sight of the Lord is the phrase the Bible so often uses, and then we are told a few paragraphs later that his son, when he was king, 'walked with the Lord.' One of the great examples of this is King Josiah whose father worshipped idols, abandoned the Lord and did not walk in his way. Josiah's great-grandfather filled the streets of Jerusalem with the blood of the innocent, consulted sorcerers and mediums and sacrificed his own sons to foreign gods. But Josiah loved the Lord and we are told:

Josiah did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.

2 Kings 22:2

If I sin, my kids are not to blame. If I sin, Jen is not to blame. If I sin, my parents are not to blame or my sister or my in-laws or anyone else. My sin is my own. I am to blame and no one else.

One of the issues clouding our societal debate about justice is collective guilt. Collective guilt says that people can share the blame for sin that others have committed. For example, collective guilt says German citizens decades after World War 2 are to blame for the Holocaust. Collective guilt says that if my grandparents belonged to the Ku Klux Klan I share their sin of racism. Collective guilt says that I as a white person share the guilt of slavery, segregation, and the oppression of people of color and what others who look like me actively do today. Anytime we label an entire group negatively for something a small group or even one person does—immigrants, the poor, the one percent, white people, elites, liberals, the media, the police—we at least entertain and we might even embrace collective guilt.

Although we all have sin in our life and we all need to be aware of how we might event today be caught up in sinful, patterns, practices and habits—which we'll discuss in a few minutes—Jesus does not condemn us for the sin of others. Collective guilt actually works against justice.

The Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt said:

Where all are guilty, no one is; confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits, and the very magnitude of the crime the best excuse for doing nothing.

I know a man from Tennessee whose parents were ardent segregationists. His parents protested against Civil Rights marchers, wrote letters to the editor of the paper praising Jim Crow. When Martin Luther King Jr. came to Nashville, they stood on the streets and shouted obscenities. His Dad ran White Citizen Council Meetings. He has wrestled with the guilt of their sin and prejudice his entire life. He has spent a lifetime trying to escape the shame of his parents and became a shaming, angry, petty scold trying to prove he was different that his racist parents. The weight of their guilt damaged his life and poisoned his relationships.

His life is a metaphor for our culture.

Collective guilt is why our culture rushes to judgment and condemnation for anyone who says anything that offends the current justice orthodoxy because we all must prove we're not guilty. And the quickest and easiest way to demonstrate my innocence is condemn someone else.

But not only does collective guilt punish the innocent, it paralyzes us to accept the sin guilt of others. If the guilt of hundreds of years, millions of people, generation after generation is heaped on to my shoulders, how do I function? How do I begin to pay that back? How do I even start to make it right?

I cannot. The burden is too great to bear. And this is where a lot of us find ourselves. We cannot sustain the guilt of generations and so we close our eyes and our ears to the reality of injustice today. Collective guilt creates a stigma and the need to prove a negative, namely that I am not to blame for whatever sin it is assumed I committed. Taking other's guilt upon myself negates any authority Jesus intends me to have as His follower and makes me a quiet, submissive bystander. So instead of playing the role of peacemaker and influencer Jesus intends me to play, I don't dare speak God's Word because I am guilty of grievous sin and who am I? Instead of practicing peace, love, joy, goodness, kindness, patience, gentleness and self-control in a world that desperately needs it, I keep my head down and try to look sorry and penitent. Collective guilt makes good people passive.

Remember Romans 8:1 promises, **“There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

But lack of guilt does not absolve us of responsibility. We may not be guilty of the sins of the past, the sins of injustice or the sins of others who act unjustly, but it does not mean we do not bear a responsibility. Blame and responsibility are not the same thing.

Jesus frees us from guilt to empower our responsibility. We cannot receive the free grace of Jesus Christ, we cannot be set free from our sin without being gifted with responsibility for the stewardship of this world and ushering Jesus's Kingdom into it. When Jesus sets us free from the guilt of our sin we lose the ability to say, “Not me.” This is what Jesus' disciple Peter pointed to when He said:

But you are a chosen race, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people...

1 Peter 2:9-10

We may or may not be to blame but Jesus' grace always make us responsible.

Let's go back to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus told this parable in a response to lawyer's question, “Who is my neighbor?” The lawyer's question was an attempt to deflect responsibility and essentially say, “Not me.”

Jesus said a man was walking a lonely mountainous, dangerous road, notorious for robbers, going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was robbed and the robbers stripped him and left him to die. A priest walked by the man and crossed over to other side of the road. Another type of holy man, a Levite, who also would have known God's law saw the dying man and did the same thing. They both said, “I have no responsibility here. Not me.”

And then a Samaritan man came down the road. The Samaritan would have more rights than anybody to say, “Not my responsibility. Not me.” Samaritans and Jewish people were enemies. Samaritans had been marginalized and oppressed, ignored and rejected by Jews for 600 years. If the man who had been robbed was Jewish, as Jesus implies, the chances of him stopping for a dying Samaritan man along a lonely and dangerous road would have been quite small.

Yet the Samaritan man stopped. He poured costly oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them. He put the wounded, dying man on his own animal and took him immediately to an inn, where he stayed with him and charged the innkeeper to take care of the man after he left and to send him the bill.

Why? Jesus tells us it was because the Samaritan saw a neighbor dying there along the side of the road and determined that he would love his neighbor as himself. The Samaritan was not guilty. He did nothing at all to hurt that man. But he was responsible to his neighbor and his God. He didn't say, “Not me.” Instead the Samaritan acted justly.

And then Jesus told the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.”

How do we do that? How do we live guilt-free lives, lives free of shame and responsible for the justice of today?

The German theologian, pastor, martyr who died in a Nazi prison camp just a few weeks before the end of World War 2 famously said:

We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer said it is important to do just what the Samaritan did, to bandage the wounds of those who have been wounded by injustice. We get this and many of you already do this very well. At First Pres as a congregation and many of you individually are engaged all over the city in bandaging the wounded of victims beneath the wheels of injustice. You are generous with your time, your resources, your lives, your homes in loving your neighbor as yourself. You have good relationships with people from very different walks of life, people who face an uphill battle because of where they are from, their education, lack of a stable home, poverty, lack of connections and sometimes just sheer racism.

But's that not all Bonhoeffer says we should do. Bonhoeffer also we need to stop the wheels of injustice from turning. We need to be aware of the sinful patterns, practices, habits and legacies that we are all born into and may or may not realize. And those sinful patterns, practices and habits is something we inherit simply by being surrounded and raised by broken and sinful people. It's called generational sin.

In the Old Testament, this phenomenon of generational sin is mentioned often.

The LORD will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

Exodus 34:8

Although we are not guilty for the sins of our parents and grandparents, the consequences of sin can linger, for decades, generations, even centuries. Children must live with the fallout from what those who have come before us have done. We can be caught up in sinful practices and habits and patterns that seem quite natural (and maybe even good) and we have no idea there is anything sinful about it because we learned it from broken, sinful people whom we love and trust.

A couple of weeks ago I was in Guthrie for some football games that our kids were involved in. After the game I saw two men start to get into a fight. One of them was crossing the street and the other man who was driving a truck nearly hit him. The two men began to exchange words and the man got out of his truck and things began to escalate when I stepped in to try to calm things down. They were yelling at each other and yelling at me. Pretty soon one man's wife stood 15 feet away and she began yelling at everybody. She used every explicative you can think of screaming and yelling words that would make a merchant marine blush. She was bent over shaking her first and pointing her finger. In that moment I noticed as the woman yelled, her elementary school-aged little daughter stood three feet away from her, in the exact same position, screaming the same foul words.

Thankfully, the police arrived, and I when I eventually went back into the stadium and my wife Jen asked what the sirens were all about and I had the joy of telling her, "Oh that was just something I was involved in."

But this is the Bible means when it teaches, "The sins of the father (and in this case the mother too) are visited upon the children to the third and fourth generations." What is going to happen to that little girl who saw her Dad try to fight a man in the street and watched her Mom scream obscenities on a public sidewalk? Sinful habits, practices and patterns are impressed upon us

None of us enter this world a blank slate. We are born into broken things that we take in like poison. They are imprinted upon us more deeply than we can imagine. And we need to be aware, and work to dismantle, the sinful habits, patterns, practices and legacies that we are a part of—even unwittingly.

If we go to back the Ezekiel passage, that is exactly what the righteous son did. The righteous son saw how what was modeled for him by his unrighteous father. The son saw his father practice extortion, rob people and do no good. The son chose to live differently. The son repented of the sinful habits, patterns and legacies given to him.

We would be lying if we said we had none of those sinful patterns, practices and habits in our life. We would be fooling ourselves to believe that the sins of parents and grandparents were still not visited upon us. **Psalm 19:12** pleads with God:

Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.

Our instinct of course is to say we're innocent, to declare, "Not me!" But when we are in Christ, when we trust in His grace and we understand that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, this gives us the courage to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal those sinful patterns, practices and habits that we don't yet see.

