

## **Blame-Shifting – Rejecting Personal Responsibility**

### **Someone Else's Fault**

I went to my psychiatrist to be psychoanalyzed  
To find out why I killed my cat and blackened my wife's eyes  
He put me on a downy couch to see what he could find  
And this is what he dredged up from my unconscious mind.  
When I was one, my mommy hid my dolly in the trunk  
And so it follows naturally that I am always drunk.  
When I was two, I saw my father kiss the maid one day  
And that is why I suffer now from kleptomania.  
When I was three, I suffered hatred from my brothers  
And so it follows naturally I poisoned all my lovers.  
I'm so glad that I have learned the lesson this has taught  
That everything I do that's wrong is someone else's fault.<sup>1</sup>

Wouldn't it be great if you never had to admit that you were wrong, never take responsibility for your actions, never have to say that you are sorry? Many people would have us believe that we are not responsible for our own actions. We are victims, not sinners. *We* are not the problem; the problem is lack of education, lack of money, or lack of parenting—everything I do that's wrong is someone else's fault. We have reasons for our bad behavior -- bullying, neglect, abuse. We were mistreated when they were little, so we are not responsible for their behavior as adults. Whatever the reason, people think of themselves as victims instead of as sinners. They seek to avoid personal responsibility.

Blame shifting and refusing to take personal responsibility are very common problems, both in the world and in the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Russell, edited slightly.

Today we are finishing up our Summer Sermon Series on sins of the spirit by looking at the sin of blame-shifting, or we could describe this as avoiding personal responsibility. This sin is both an attitude and an action. In an effort to avoid responsibility, we try to blame someone else. Or perhaps what is more common is that we make exceptions and excuses for ourselves; we blame our failures on other people or on special circumstances.

The Bible clearly teaches personal responsibility. We are answerable to God for our actions and attitudes, and we should not try to shift the blame for our own failures. We should not try to excuse our sinful behavior by appealing to difficult circumstances.

What does the Bible teach about blame-shifting and personal responsibility?

I. We must take personal responsibility for our own actions.

A. Each person is responsible for his own works.

1. Jesus taught that God holds us accountable even for “idle words” (Mt 12:36)—we’ll give an account in the day of judgment.
2. We are accountable for how we use our gifts and talents—money, time, opportunities, resources.
3. We are accountable for obeying the civil law (Rom 13); we are under legitimate human authority. We may be rewarded or punished according to how we keep or violate the law of the land.
4. We are accountable for the promises and agreements we make.

Ps 15:4 *[God honors the one who] ... swears to his own hurt and does not change;*

The clear biblical teaching is that we are personally accountable for our own behavior, whether good or bad.

B. Each person is responsible for his own sin.

Gen 2:17 *But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*

God held Adam responsible for his sin. The curse of sin is a direct result of Adam’s actions. Rom 5:12

Ezekiel 18:2-4 *What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge'? "As I live," says the Lord GOD, "you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are Mine; The soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; The soul who sins shall die."*

Jeremiah 31:29–30 *In those days they shall say no more: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge.' 30 But every one shall die for his own iniquity; ...*

What does this saying mean? One generation of the Israelites had sinned, and the result was 70 years in Babylonian captivity. The next generation of Israelites was suffering because of the sinful behavior of the previous generation. The fathers had sinned, but the children are suffering. That did not seem fair or just.

The point God is making here is that each person will be held accountable for his own sin. The person who sins will be judged irrespective of what his ancestors had done. I.e., God holds people individually responsible for their own behavior.

Although there may be consequences of sins from the previous generation or from your parents, ultimately, you are responsible for your own actions.

- C. Each person will be judged for his own works.

The Bible refers to two main future judgments:

1. *Believers* will stand before God at the Judgment Seat of Christ to receive rewards for service.

Rom 14:10, 14 *... we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. ... every one of us shall give account of himself to God.*

Each believer will stand before God at the Judgment Seat of Christ to give an account of himself. Believers will receive rewards for their service to God. We'll find out what our works were worth—wood, hay, stubble or gold, silver, precious stones.

2. *Unbelievers* will stand before God at the Great White Throne to receive punishment for their evil works.

Rev 20:13 *And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.*

Unbelievers often do good works, but these good works are non-meritorious; they do not save. Good works do not balance out sinful works. God will punish sin fairly and justly. Every unbeliever will get exactly what he deserves.

Both of these judgments are individual. That is, you won't be able to blame anyone else for your rewards or your punishment. Each individual stands alone before God.

*Isa 3:10 Say to the righteous that it shall be well with them, For they shall eat the fruit of their doings.*

*Jer 17:10 I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings.*

*Jer 21:14 But I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings,"*

*Jer 32:19 ... Your eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, to give everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings.*

- D. No one can blame God for personal sin.

*James 1:13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.*

God never tempts anyone to sin; he never entices/solicits anyone toward sin. Satan does that; he is the tempter. But even Satan cannot force anyone to sin. Satan can influence toward sin, but he cannot coerce or compel. Even under direct satanic temptation, no one can blame anyone but himself for sin.

- E. No one can escape personal responsibility for sin.

If anyone had an excuse for his sin, it would be Judas. He could truly say, "The devil made me do it."

*Lu 22:3 Then Satan entered into Judas surnamed Iscariot, ...*

Not only that, what Judas fulfilled prophecy.

*Mt 26:24 The Son of man goeth **as it is written of him**: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born.*

*Joh 17:12 ... none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled.*

Why does God hold Judas accountable for his sins if he were totally dominated by Satan and if he were simply fulfilling prophecy?

God holds people accountable for their actions because people do what they want to do. God did not force Judas to do anything, and Satan could not force Judas to do anything. He cooperated with Satan voluntarily; he was complicit, not coerced.

Likewise, prophecy does not force anyone to do anything. The fact that Judas operated in fulfillment of prophecy does not remove his guilt. He's still accountable and responsible for his actions which he did because he wanted to do them. As Jesus said, "It had been good for that man if he had not been born." I.e., he's facing severe judgment for his actions.

Thus, if our action is not coerced/forced, we are responsible for whatever we do, whether good or bad. We are not puppets on strings; we have inclinations and desires that we follow. God holds us accountable for whatever we do because ultimately, we do what we want to do.

There is a very important exception to that rule of personal accountability: God does *not* hold believers in Christ accountable for our sins; Jesus paid for them when he died on the cross. Rom 8:1 The only way to avoid personal accountability for sin is to be saved....

F. What about those texts that extend consequences of sin to others?

We've probably all read verses like:

*Exodus 20:5-6 I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

Although the Bible teaches personal responsibility, it also teaches that sin has consequences, both personally and collectively, both immediately and into the future. Personal sin often affects others. Sin and ungodliness often extend down through the generations from parents to children. What we do in the present has results in the future.

Notice that the iniquities of the fathers will be visited on the children *who hate God*. So it's not as if the children—i.e., the next generations—were innocent. They hate God just like the fathers did, and they will suffer the same judgment. So these succeeding generations are not suffering unfairly/unjustly. God is absolutely just and fair, especially with unbelievers. He'll give them exactly what they deserve—no more, no less.

E.g., the famous study of the descendants of Jonathan Edwards and a notorious drunk.

**Trans:** All that is to say that our personal sin often has long-term consequences. God holds us personally responsible for our sins.

II. We must not try to avoid personal responsibility for our sin.

One of the clearest teachings of the Bible is that God holds us accountable for our own actions. Since that is true, we must not shift the blame or try to excuse ourselves for our bad behavior.

King Saul is perhaps one of the clearest examples of someone who shifted blame from himself to others. We see this on at least two occasions.

A. In 1 Sam 13, Saul claimed that he had to “force” himself to conduct the burnt offerings because Samuel did not show up at the expected time. He was afraid of the Philistines attacking him and he was afraid that the army would disband (.12). So this was an emergency situation that called for desperate measures. He felt justified in his sinful behavior because of unusual circumstances.

B. Then a couple of chapters later (1 Sam 15), Saul was supposed to destroy the Amalekites. He mostly does so, but spares the king and a good number of the best animals. When Samuel asks whether he had completed this task, Saul claims that he did. But then Samuel asks, “What *meaneth* then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears?” and Saul had to admit that he spared the animals because...

*the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the LORD thy God in Gilgal. (vs. 21)*

So the fault here lies with the people, Saul says. It was not Saul's fault if the people kept the best animals. And besides, they kept the animals to be sacrificed to the Lord.

Saul here uses several common excuses: emergency situations, popularity, good intentions.

**App:** Typically speaking, when people want to shift the blame and avoid personal responsibility, they appeal to these same excuses.

“It’s not my fault because of an unusual, emergency situation. Normally I would not have done this, but I ‘forced myself’ because the situation demanded it.”

“It’s not my fault because others influenced me. I was simply giving in to peer pressure. If others were not pressuring me, I never would have done it.”

“It’s not my fault because I was trying to do something good. My intentions were pure. It’s sometimes necessary to do wrong in order to do right.”

C. What were the results for Saul’s disobedience?

1. In the first case, Samuel told him that he had done foolishly in disobeying the commandment of the Lord. Because of this disobedience, God would take away the kingdom from Saul.
2. In the second case, Samuel reinforced the importance of simple obedience to God’s commands.

*Sam 15:22-23 Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king.*

So for Saul, failure to obey and the effort to shift the blame resulted in his loss of the kingdom.

**App:** Emergencies, crises, and unusual situations do not give us an excuse to set aside God’s commandments. In fact, emergencies are times in which we must trust God the most and strive to be consistently obedient. Instead of using emergencies as excuses to disobey, we should use them to draw closer to God and to trust that He will provide a way out of the situation or grace to endure it.

Because God is gracious and merciful, we may not suffer the direct consequences of sin. Ultimately, saved people will not be condemned or punished for their sins.

However, we may fall under God's "fatherly displeasure." I.e., we may experience discipline or chastisement. 1 John tells us that "there is a sin unto death." Cf. 1 Cor 11—"many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." Cf. Gal 6:7-8

Because of God's great mercy and grace toward us, we do not have to fear coming under God's condemnation. God's grace does not give us a license to sin, but it does mean that we cannot lose our salvation because of our sin.

*Ps 103:10-11 He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.*

**Trans:** It should be obvious that we can't blame others for our own sins. We must take personal responsibility and not try to pass the buck or play the victim.

What *should* a believer do when he or she sins?

### III. Respond biblically to personal sin.

Believers are not sinlessly perfect people; we still sin. Instead of trying to avoid responsibility or excuse ourselves, we should follow the biblical guidelines regarding personal sin.

#### A. Confess your sin to God. Admit it. Own up to it. 1 John 1:8-10

The word "confess" means to admit, acknowledge, or agree with. When you confess your sin, you admit to God that you have sinned and acknowledge that you are guilty.

When you are guilty of sin, you should feel that sense of guilt and shame. Don't ignore this feeling. Your conscience is a very important voice telling you right from wrong. However, you shouldn't wait until you feel guilty to confess your sin to God. You should ask God to forgive you as soon as possible after you sin even if you don't feel particularly guilty.



B. Forsake your sin.

Proverbs 28:13 *He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.*

“Forsake” means to leave behind or to turn your back on. This is repentance—turning away from sin. Quit the sinful behavior.

C. Make amends for your sin.

Your sin often affects others. Therefore, you must make things right with the person affected by your sin. Don't pretend the sin never happened. Deal with it biblically.

\* Apologize, ask others to forgive you if necessary.

\* Repair, replace, or repay for what you did. That's what it means to take personal responsibility. If you broke something or hurt someone, you need to make it right. Provide restitution for what you did.

D. Be sensitive about sin. Psalm 19:12, 139:23-24

We cannot just ignore or overlook personal sin. It ought to bother you when you sin. Your conscience ought to bother you. Ask God to show you your sins and your shortcomings. We should do this daily. Don't let sin pile up.

Ephesians 5:11 *And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.*

Don't talk or joke about sinful behavior or enjoy it when others sin. Sin grieves God; it should grieve us, too.

All of this shows us that it's wrong to blame others for our own sins and failures. It's wrong to play the victim when you are the wrongdoer.

God holds us personally responsible for our own actions. Those who are saved don't have to worry about eternal condemnation for our sins, but there may be other natural results of our behavior that have negative consequences for us and even for our descendants. We will reap what we sow.

Be truthful and honest enough to take the blame when you deserve it. Don't try to avoid personal responsibility; don't try to blame someone else for what you are responsible for. God holds us all personally accountable for what we do, and it's best for us to take responsibility for our own actions.