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WOULD YOU INHERIT YOUR FATHER'S LIABILITIES?

Today's Text: Jer. 31; Ezek. 18

Extracts:

1. **"In those days they shall say no more: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But *everyone shall die for his own iniquity*; every man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge" [Jer. 31: 29-30]**
2. **The word of the Lord came to me again, saying, "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*" [Ezek. 18: 1-4]**

At the time of his death at the age of 90, the estate of J. Howard Marshall II was worth about US\$1.6 billion.¹ His youngest son, F. Pierce Marshall, claimed that he was the sole heir of his father's billions. His claim was contested by Anna Nicole Smith, his step-mother and widow of the deceased. She was 26 years old when she married Howard Marshall and they were married for only fourteen months. She wanted a piece of the estate allegedly promised her by her late Texan husband and she took the matter to court. After eleven years of litigation, the matter reached the US Supreme Court!

Why do you think that Son Marshall is keen on inheriting his father's estate? Clearly, it is because of the huge assets that his father has left behind. According to UK statistics for 2000-01, people who were married at the point of death left 79% of their estate to their spouses and 14.5% to their children. On the other hand, those who were widowed or divorced left 77% of their estate to their children.² If the Marshall estate had owed more than its assets, would the young man have been keen to inherit such liabilities? Would you? I doubt!

In today's lesson, God raised the same issue from the spiritual angle. God commanded the people of Israel to no longer hold children vicariously liable for their parents' sins, that the soul that sins shall die. If that is the case, why do we still talk about generational curses and original sin? Does God's dispensation apply to some people and not to others? How can we benefit from this grace? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ Based on 'Anna Nicole Gets Sympathetic Ears,' www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/02/28/entertainment

² www.hmrc.gov.uk/stat/inheritance_tax/table12.9.pdf

1. Vicarious liability at a glance

The doctrine of vicarious liability holds a person liable by virtue of his/her relationship with the wrongdoer.³ For example, following the remark about Mohammad that Moslems considered blasphemous in the Pope's speech to German professors on Tuesday, 12 September 2006, an Italian nun was gunned down in Mogadishu, Somalia, a few days later. What was the link? The Pope is the head of the Catholic Church to which the nun belonged! That is why people sue the employers of workers who do them wrong in the course of their duties. For example, a person who feels wrongly shot by a cop sues the State or the Police authority. Under this doctrine, should a child be held responsible for the tort of his or her parents or vice versa?

When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, He told him [Ex. 20: 5-6]:

*I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, **visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon 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.*

Those who hate God include fools who say in their hearts that there is no God [Ps. 14: 1], and the wicked, unrepentant or reprobate mind [Rom. 1: 18-32]. Those who love God include the wise who fear God [Prov. 1: 7], the repentant [1 Jn 1: 7-9], and the transformed mind [Rom. 12: 2]. On the surface, it seems that children will be vicariously held accountable for the sins of their parents. In other words, just as children can inherit blessings from their parents, they can also inherit curses. The clearest statement of that is the state of man on account of the original sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve. By virtue of their fall, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" [Rom. 3: 23].

However, we do know that there are exceptions to every rule. Why should an innocent child be held liable for the tort of his or her parents? Should children who love God be punished for their parents who hated Him? Should children who hate God benefit from the blessings of their parents who loved Him? These are the issues that have been treated in the relevant chapters from the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel that we shall now study.

2. To which generation do you belong?

Having suffered defeat and exile in the hands of their enemies, the children of Israel had come to the conclusion that they were being punished for the sins of their parents. A popular proverb among them became, "The fathers have eaten

³ 'Vicarious Liability,' www.papleton-law.com/article.jsp?pract.Area=20&articleIndex=2

sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" [Jer. 31: 29-30]. God forbade them to no longer use that proverb because "the soul who sins shall die" [Ezek. 18: 4].

A closer look at the word of God on Mount Sinai quoted earlier suggests that just as the blessings apply to those (parents and children) who love Him and keep His commandments, the curses also apply to those (parents and children) who hate Him. God conveyed this principle through the prophet Ezekiel as follows [Ezek. 18: 20]:

The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

Therefore, *the generation to which we belong is determined mainly by our own relationship with God more than what we have inherited from our parents.* On account of personal responsibility for one's sins, we can belong to any of the following types of generations, among others:

a) *The cursed generation*

This group consists of wicked children who have followed in the footsteps of their wicked parents. Consequently, "the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" [Ezek. 18: 20]. So, because they have hated God, He will visit "the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations" [Ex/ 20: 5].

Take the case of King Ahab of Israel, the husband of Jezebel. His father, Omri, "did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him" [1 Kgs 16: 25]. Ahab was worse and he "did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" [v. 33]. His wife, Jezebel, massacred the prophets of God and replaced them with prophets of Baal, an idol [1 Kgs 18: 4]. For his sake, Israel experienced a three-year drought [1 Kgs 17: 1-7]. For his wickedness, he died a cheap and miserable death in the hands of the Syrians [1 Kgs 22: 29-38]. In due course, God got Jehu anointed king of Israel with the mandate to "strike down the house of Ahab ... for the whole house of Ahab shall perish" [2 Kgs 9: 7, 8]. In deed, true to the word of God, the generations of Ahab that hated God were destroyed. That is what happens to those with generational curses: *they are affected as long as they have not repented and given their lives to the Lord.*

b) *The lost generation*

Some of us may be born with the silver spoon of God-fearing parents in our mouths but wind up hating God. Such a generation is conveyed in the book of Ezekiel as follows [**Ezek. 18: 5-13**]:

If a man is just and does what is lawful and right... he shall surely live. (But) if he begets a son who is a robber or shedder of blood... he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him.

Samuel was a renowned judge and prophet, “and the word of the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground” [**1 Sam. 3: 19**]. However, his sons, Joel and Abijah, were rejected as judges by the people of Israel because “his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes and perverted justice” [**1 Sam. 8: 1-3**].

This is the generation of those who have squandered the spiritual blessings that their God-fearing parents had bequeathed to them. How many young people do you know today who were raised in decent homes but have now taken to Satan worship, alcoholism and drugs? Like the Prodigal Son, they took their inheritance of God’s love and protection and wasted it on the altar of human pride and worldliness. Unless they repent and return to the path of righteousness, they could be lost forever because the soul that sins shall die.

c) *The saved or redeemed generation*

God said to the children of Israel, if a man “begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done, and considers but does not do likewise, ... he shall not die for the iniquity of his father; he shall surely live!” [**Ezek. 18: 14-17**]. Such a son will not bear the guilt of the father “because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all (God’s) statutes and observed them” [**v. 19**]. On Mount Sinai, God told Moses that He would show mercy to thousands, to those who love Him and keep His commandments. Therefore, the children who refuse to follow in their parents’ wicked footsteps but repent and give their lives to the Lord belong to the saved generation.

Take the example of Josiah who became king of Judah at the age of eight years and reigned for 31 years [**2 Kgs 22: 1**]. His father, Amon, was so evil that his servants conspired and killed him in his house [**2 Kgs 21: 21-23**]. However, Josiah’s mother raised him to be God-fearing. During his reign, the country witnessed major reformations and true worship. In deed, “before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to the Law of Moses; nor after him did any arise like him” [**2 Kgs 23: 1-25**].

Under the New Covenant, God’s mercy cannot be *earned* by works of righteousness but by His grace, which He has demonstrated by sending His only begotten Son to die on the cross of Calvary for all sinners for all times.

Therefore, those who have renounced sin and given their lives to Christ have broken away from the path of rebellion of their ancestral parents, Adam and Eve. Their ancestral curse has been broken. They have become part of the redeemed, “a chosen generation” and God’s “special people” [1 Pet. 2: 9].

d) *The blessed generation*

This consists of the children of God-fearing parents who are themselves *also God-fearing*. In this case, the blessings of God on the parents are extended to their children. A good example was King Asa, the father of Jehoshaphat. Asa “did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God” [2 Chron. 14: 2], and his heart “was loyal all his days” [2 Chron. 15: 17]. Consequently, there was peace in Judah during his 35-year reign [v. 19]. When his son, Jehoshaphat succeeded him, the Lord was with him “because he walked in the former ways of his father David... (and) sought the God of his father and walked in His commandments... Therefore, the Lord established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah gave presents to Jehoshaphat, and he had riches and honour in abundance” [2 Chron. 17: 3, 4, 5].

The blessings on the home of the God-fearing are summarized as follows [Ps. 128: 1-4]:

Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. When you eat the labour of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine, in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table, behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.

When the fear of the Lord passes from parents to children, God’s mercy will extend to thousands of their descendants. Is that not an enviable kind of heritage? That is why David enthusiastically affirmed, “I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread” [Ps. 37: 25].

What conclusion can we draw from the forgoing analysis? It is that your salvation is in your hands. You cannot continue to blame your parents or siblings or spouses or teachers or friends or pastors for your current situation in life. The soul that sins shall die!

3. Conclusion: Join the redeemed and blessed generation!

The decision to come to God is yours. Others can preach to you but they cannot force you to accept Him. *In the event that you are willing*, God has given you the path to take to return to Him:

- Repent

God says to you, “Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit” [Ezek. 18: 31]. When you admit your guilt, God will do what is right and set you free from unrighteousness [1 Jn 1: 7-9]. God has promised the repentant, “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” [Jer. 31: 34].

- Live your new life in Christ

God has signed a new covenant with you but not according to the one that He had made with Moses and the children of Israel. In God’s words, “I will put My law in (your) minds, and write it on (your) hearts; and (He) will be (your) God, and (you) shall be (His) people” [Jer. 31: 32, 33]. Jesus is the Mediator of this new covenant “by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” [Heb. 9: 11-15]. Therefore, you must practise your new life in Christ *all day everyday!*

What you do with your own life and choices will influence your inheritance. Do you want to be held accountable for the sins of your parents or ancestors? Do you want to inherit their liabilities? Only you can answer those questions!