

Are The Father's Sins Passed On To The Children?

In 1946 Dr. Benjamin Spock published a book titled *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. His book was an international best seller and many parents followed his advice as they raised their children. Most of the world interpreted him to advocate leniency in disciplining children. Society's liberals began pushing parents to stop spanking children and become more tolerant of rebellious behavior.

Later Redbook Magazine published an article written by Dr. Benjamin Spock titled, "*How Not to Bring Up a Bratty Child*."¹ He said he was concerned by the bratty behavior of children. The change in philosophy of raising children had touched the hearts of parents around the world because no parent wanted to be the reason why their children hated them, were wicked,

or struggle later in life.

Redbook Magazine reported that during an interview Dr. Benjamin Spock had said the, "Inability to be firm is, to my mind, the commonest problem of parents in America today."²

He blamed the parents and the experts for the "brattiness" of America's children.



In later editions, in the 1980s, he discouraged parents from spanking children.³ For a historical review of Dr. Spock's view about corporal punishment visit "Did Dr. Benjamin Spock recant his child-rearing teachings later in life?"⁴ Yet, today the punishment for wrong doing of both children and criminals is discouraged and evil is exploding.

Governments and parents around the world should have followed God's advice in Proverbs 22:6,

**Train up a child in the way he should go,
Even when he is old he will not depart from it.
Proverbs 22:6 (NASB)**

This is a wonderful passage that provides guidance to parents. But some have taught that it is a promise. So many parents have believed that this is a guarantee that godly training will result in their children becoming believers or righteous

adults. But sadly this verse only promises that if parents do not train their children, then the character of their children will not be changed. The Hebrew words for "the way he should go"

¹ Dr. Benjamin Spock. "How Not to Bring Up a Bratty Child." Redbook Magazine. February 1974, p. 29.

² "Blame Him For Brats Spock Swallows His Words." Beaver County Times - Jan 23, 1974. (news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2002&dat=19740123&id=nfsqA-AAAIBAJ&sjid=UNoFAAAAIBAJ&pg=6430,1705588&hl=en).

³ "A new Spock? The Doctor Says No". The Milwaukee Journal. Apr 14, 1974. (<https://skeptics.stackexchange.com/questions/28022/did-dr-benjamin-spock-recant-his-child-rearing-teachings-later-in-life>).

³ Jason M. Fuller. "The Science And Statistics Behind Spanking Suggest That Laws Allowing Corporal Punishment Are In The Best Interests Of The Child." University Of Akron. p. 250. See footnote 23 (<https://uakron.edu/dotAsset/724600.pdf>).

⁴ "Did Dr. Benjamin Spock recant his child-rearing teachings later in life?" (skeptics.stackexchange.com/questions/28022/did-dr-benjamin-spock-recant-his-child-rearing-teachings-later-in-life)

actually read “the way according to his mouth.” That is, if parents train a child according to his or her character at birth, the child will never change.”⁵ Actually, parents are commanded to counter the child’s bent toward evil. Children are not by nature inherently good. If parents avoid discipline, the children will never move in the direction of a righteous behavior.

The advice of both Dr. Benjamin Spock and Proverbs 22:6 have touched the hearts of parents who wanted the best for their children. So, some followed Dr. Spock’s advice and Christian parents have followed Proverbs 22:6. Both have cared about their children. But Dr. Spock’s unbiblical advice results in “brats,” to use his own words.

Not only do most parents want their children to behave well as adults, they also feel responsible when they do not behave morally. They often blame themselves. For example, the Hindu religion teaches that Vishnu’s incarnation was told,

Like a cow, a sinful act perpetrated does not produce immediate fruits. If the fruit is not seen in the perpetrator himself, it is seen in his son or in his son’s son, or daughter’s son.⁶

The statement means that if the negative consequences of a parent’s sin are not immediately obvious, they will become obvious later in their children.

Peggy Drexler wrote this in the article “Is a Child’s Behavior Always a Reflection of His Parents?” in Psychology Today,

We’ve long held a tendency to blame parents for how their children behave and develop. Though we most often fault mothers more than fathers, the idea is the same: If we’re good parents, our children will turn out okay. If we’re bad parents, well, they won’t.⁷

So, parents want their children to be good children. Christian parents want their children to be righteous and to choose to

follow Christ. When children commit sins, some parents feel responsible. This is true today and was true of the people who lived in 592 B.C. That is when Ezekiel 18 was written. This concludes the introduction to our study from Ezekiel 18:1-32.

PROVERB ABOUT FATHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN. We are going to discover some important principles about parents and children, and four principles about their sin. You will soon understand why I began with this introduction. Here are the first four verses of the chapter.

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

“What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying,

‘The fathers eat the sour grapes,

But the children’s teeth are set on edge?’

“As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. “Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die. Ezekiel 18:1-4 (NASB)

We are told that Yahweh spoke to the prophet Ezekiel about a parable that was common among the people of Israel. The parable is in verse 2,

The fathers eat the sour grapes,

But the children’s teeth are set on edge

This parable is also given in Jeremiah 31:29. The parable will make more sense if we change the word “but” to “and.” We can do that because the Hebrew word for “but” can also mean “and.” Most current Bible translations use the word “and.” If we do that, the proverb is,

The fathers eat the sour grapes,

And the children’s teeth are set on edge

The Hebrew word for “set on edge” is *qabah*. It can also be translated as “dull.” The basic idea of the proverb is that sour grapes cause damage to teeth. That is, the acid in sour grapes can irritate teeth or set them on edge. If a person eats too many sour grapes, the teeth can become dull. But the message of the

5 Chuck Swindoll. “A Better Way to Train Up A Child.” Insight for Living Ministries Resources. June 15, 2009. (www.insight.org/resources/article-library/individual/a-better-way-to-train-up-a-child)

6 Kisari Mohan Ganguli, tr. The Mahabharata. Book 12. Santi Parva. 1883-1896. p. 199. (www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a090.htm)

7 Peggy Drexler Ph.D. “Is a Child’s Behavior Always a Reflection of His Parents?” September 18, 2012. Psychology Today. (www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/our-gender-ourselves/201209/is-child-s-behavior-always-reflection-his-parents).

proverb, as we will soon learn, is that the sins of the parents are passed on to their children.

1ST PRINCIPLE. Then Yahweh told Ezekiel this proverb will not exist in Israel anymore and gave us two divine principles. The first is,

“Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine.”

Here Yahweh declared that He owns every soul. The Hebrew word for “soul” is *nepes* and it does not mean spirit. It refers to “breath” or that which keeps our physical bodies alive. Ecclesiastes 12:7 also adds that God gave us our spirit. It says,

... the spirit will return to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:7 (NASB)

So, Yahweh owns us and not us. He can do anything to us because He is like the Potter and we are just the clay.

2ND PRINCIPLE. Yahweh’s second principle is.

The soul who sins will die.

This is an important divine principle. When Adam and Eve sinned, their *nepes* or their physical bodies started dying and their spirits died. Romans 6:23 says “the wages of sin is death.” It is a parallel verse to Ezekiel 18:20. Both verses warn us that when we sin our reward is death—physical and spiritual. So, the second principle is the soul who sins will die. We see this daily as people are constantly dying.

3RD PRINCIPLE. Verses 5-20 now give us the third principle. There are three sections in these verses. Verses 5-9 are about a righteous father. The second section is verses 10-13 which are about his wicked son. The third section is verses 14-18. They are about a wicked father who has a righteous son. The message of section one is easy to follow. So, I will just read and summarize each one. Let us discover the third principle. Here are verses 5-9,

“But if a man is righteous and practices justice and righteousness, and does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes

to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor’s wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period — if a man does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, if he does not lend money on interest or take increase, if he keeps his hand from iniquity and executes true justice between man and man, if he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully — he is righteous and will surely live,” declares the Lord GOD. Ezekiel 18:5-9 (NASB)

Yahweh defined a righteous man by what he does. Notice the key word “practices.” The Hebrew word refers to the pattern of life of the man from his past to his present. His past record reveals his character. Notice that Yahweh described a righteous man as one who practices righteousness. That is what a righteous man or woman does! His righteousness is revealed by what he does. There are fourteen things in this list that a righteous man does. But they can be grouped into five categories. The first is that a righteous man practices justice (v. 5). That is surely missing from our country today. It reveals that we do not have righteous leaders at the top. The second category is a righteous person worships Yahweh and Him alone (v. 6a). The next categories are he maintains sexual purity (v. 6b), he is a good neighbor (v. 7-8), and the fifth category is that he obeys Yahweh’s statutes and ordinances (v. 9a). Then the last part of verse 9 says that such a man is righteous and will surely live. Now these categories do not cover every possible behavior of a righteous man, but they do contrast with the major areas of sin.

Now Yahweh described the man’s wicked son in verses 10-13,

“Then he may have a violent son who sheds blood and who does any of these things to a brother (though he himself did not do any of these things), that is, he even eats at the mountain shrines, and defiles his neighbor’s wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge, but lifts up his eyes to the idols and commits abomination, he lends money on interest and takes increase; will he live? He will not live! He has committed all these abominations, he will surely be put to death; his blood will be on his own head.” Ezekiel 18:10-13 (NASB)

The son is the opposite of his father. He violates every category of righteousness. Now notice verse 13. Yahweh said two important things. First, the son will not live! Second, “his blood will be on his own head.” That is, he alone is responsible for his own death. He sinned and so he will die. He cannot blame anyone else.

Next, Yahweh described the reverse of the verses we just read. Verses 14-18 are about a wicked father and a righteous son,

“Now behold, he has a son who has observed all his father’s sins which he committed, and observing does not do likewise. He does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor’s wife, or oppress anyone, or retain a pledge, or commit robbery, but he gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, he keeps his hand from the poor, does not take interest or increase, but executes My ordinances, and walks in My statutes; he will not die for his father’s iniquity, he will surely live. As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was not good among his people, behold, he will die for his iniquity.” Ezekiel 18:14-18 (NASB)

The message is that the wicked father will die, but not the righteous son.

Then verses 19-20 gives us the third principle. They say,

“Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity?’ When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.” Ezekiel 18:19-20 (NASB)

In verse 19 Yahweh knew that the people would not agree. He knows they would ask, “Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity?” Their proverb had already described what they believed. They believed that the son would be punished for the father’s sins. The father would

suffer and so would the son. But Yahweh said the righteous son would not suffer for the father’s sins! Nor will a righteous father suffer for a wicked son’s sins.

Before we go further, we need to turn to Exodus 20:5-6. We need to understand these two verses and why they do not conflict with what we are reading in our study. Here is the Exodus passage,

You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. Exodus 20:5-6 (NASB)

Yahweh said this to Moses as part of the second commandment in the Ten Commandments. When He said that He would visit the sins of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations, there are two things we need to remember. First, notice that Yahweh said at the end of verse 5 that this would happen to the children of those who hate Him, that is, to unbelieving children—not believing children. This is said in the context of the second commandment prohibiting the making of idols and worshipping them. That is, this warning applies to those who do not worship Yahweh.

The second thing to notice is from Deuteronomy 24:16. It says,

Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin. Deuteronomy 24:16 (NASB)

That is, Moses himself taught the third principle that we have discovered in our study. Each person is responsible for their own deeds. Each person will be rewarded according to their own righteous deeds or sins.

Notice that the second principle in verse 4 is repeated in verse 20. The Hebrew word that the NASB translates as “persons” is soul. Consequently, verse 20 should say, “The soul who sins will die.” Since this principle is the only one repeated in this chapter, it is the primary principle. The soul that sins deserves to die because he or she sinned.

4TH PRINCIPLE. So, we have arrived at the fourth principle. It is found in verse 20 when Yahweh said,

“The righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.”

Once again we are given the message that each soul is responsible for his or her own actions. The righteous soul will benefit from their own righteousness. The wicked soul will suffer for their own wickedness. That is, we alone are responsible for our sins and for our righteous deeds.

So, this gives us the fourth principle: a father’s sins are not passed on to their children. The only exception is the wicked descendant who hates Yahweh, then he or she will suffer the consequences of the sins of their great-grand father and great-great-grand father. Even then, parents are not responsible for a child being an unbeliever. We must remember that God Himself predestined the elect before the foundation of the world. So, a father’s sins are not passed on to their immediate children, but the consequences of their sins may if a third and fourth generation child is an unbeliever. It is the punishment they deserve for rejecting Yahweh.

CONCLUSION. As we close, we have discovered that the proverb that was floating among the people at the time of this prophecy was wrong. The proverb was,

*The fathers eat the sour grapes,
And the children’s teeth are set on edge*

They believed the sins of the fathers were passed onto the immediate children. They were saying that the children could not help themselves because the sins they were guilty of committing were due to their fathers. Yahweh should not be upset with them and cause their land to be invaded. The real guilt was their fathers. The current situation was their parent’s fault. This same philosophy exists today. Counselors blame fathers and mothers for the sins of their children. But Yahweh’s message is that the children do not inherit the guilt of the father’s sins. They do not have to commit the father’s sins. If they do commit the same sins, then they made that decision and thus they alone are guilty of the sins they commit. But children

may experience the influence and negative consequences of the father’s sins. A good illustration is the man who robs a bank, is arrested, and is eventually put in prison for ten years for his crime. His son does not inherit his guilt, but he will experience the consequences of having a father in prison. In addition, should he decide to rob a bank also, he alone is guilty for making that decision.

So, the four principles are: 1) God owns every soul; 2) the soul who sins will die; 3) we are responsible for our own deeds; and 4) the father’s sins are not passed to righteous children. We have discovered that each family member bears the guilt for his or her own sins and his or her own righteousness.

The next section, verses 21-32, is the conclusion, but we will have to wait until the next study to discover what happened.