

GOD'S LAWS GOVERNING CHANGES IN INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR

EZEKIEL 18:21–32

Introduction

Accepting personal responsibility for the misfortunes of life is difficult for most people. Just think of the people who are suffering from hardships resulting from poverty, disease, conflict, unemployment or adultery. In each case the tendency is to blame someone other than themselves for their difficulties.

- => Many who are suffering from poverty blame society instead of asking whether their failure to pursue an education or training or to work hard to better themselves has contributed to their circumstances.
- => Many who are suffering from disease blame God instead of looking at themselves to see if their own irresponsible behaviour and habits caused their poor health.
- => Many who are suffering from some conflict blame the opposing party instead of examining their own behaviour to see what part it played in causing the divisive situation.
- => Many who are suffering from unemployment blame a supervisor or the economy instead of assessing their own performance on the job.
- => Many who are suffering from a spouse's adultery blame their spouse instead of evaluating their own life to see how they might have contributed to their spouse's unfaithfulness.

Few people are willing to accept personal responsibility for the trials and sufferings that confront them. It is very difficult to accept the fact that we might be the major cause of our misfortunes. As a result, few of us are willing to accept the fact that our problems may be due to our own irresponsible behaviour. The blame for difficulties great and small usually lands at the feet of someone else. Blaming others for our suffering is an almost universal failing of human beings. This was definitely the case with the Israelites of Ezekiel's day. The Jews were suffering, and they were blaming their parents and ancestors for their hardships. Instead of searching their own hearts to see where they had failed, they blamed former generations, including their own parents. But God had earth-shattering news for them: every one of them was responsible for his or her own behaviour. The teaching of Scripture is clear: all of us are accountable to God, and He holds us individually responsible for our actions. This is, *The Certainty of God's Coming Judgment (Part 7): The Condemnation of the Soul Who Sins — God's Great Law of Individual Responsibility*, Ezekiel 18:1-32.

- I. God's law governing individual responsibility (vv. 1-4).
 - II. God's law governing the consequences of both good and bad individual behaviour (vv. 5-20).
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III. God's laws governing changes in individual behaviour (vv. 21-32).

Ezekiel 18:21-32 God's Laws Governing Changes in Individual Behaviour

God has two laws that govern changes in individual behaviour, a law governing *repentance* and a law governing *apostasy*. Note the Scripture and outline:

1. The law governing *repentance* involves the case of a wicked man who repents (vv. 21-23). If wicked people truly repent, if they turn away from their sin and turn to the LORD, they will live. They will never be separated from the LORD. In their last moment of life upon earth — before the eye can blink — the LORD will transfer righteous believers into His presence. He will neither remember their sins nor charge their sins against them. The LORD will forgive the sins of all repentant people because of their faith in Him, which they clearly demonstrate by their righteous behaviour.

Note the reference to God's loving heart (v. 23). God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. On the contrary, he longs for every human being to repent. The LORD is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance so that all may receive eternal life (2 Pet 3:9).

2. The law governing *apostasy* involves the case of a righteous man who *turns away* from the LORD and *continually commits sin* (v. 24). The sad fact is that God will never accept the good deeds of so-called righteous people. In fact, they will suffer eternal death. People who truly trust the LORD turn away from their former lifestyle of sin. People who commit apostasy — people who continue in sin and never repent — prove by their deeds that their profession was false. They had made a *false profession* of faith. In his commentary, Douglas Stewart paints a clear picture of people who commit apostasy:

If a person chooses negative conversion, from righteousness to wickedness, that person becomes a sinner and receives his or her proper reward — death. In effect, the end, not the beginning, is what determines the overall measurement by God of a person's life. Thus, as most people instinctively understand, it's not where you start out that determines your judgment, but where you end up.

Suppose, for sake of illustration, that you are going to be judged one evening at a gathering of some sort on how neatly and cleanly (not expensively) you are dressed. It doesn't really matter if you were dirty, grimy and unkempt during the afternoon, wearing your oldest, most wrinkled work clothes. Since then, if you've showered and put on neat, clean clothes, now, at the gathering, you are neat and clean. You will be judged favourably. However, suppose you were absolutely neat and clean all day, but on the way to the gathering you stopped briefly to mud wrestle an alligator. Now you are dirty and messy, and those doing the judging are not going to be very favourable to you. Your protest, "But until just before I got here I was neat and clean!" is going to fall on deaf ears. Such a point must be appreciated if the gospel is to have its

power. At the end of a person's life, when he or she concludes this temporary earthly journey, is when one must be right with God. Of course, it is very desirable to be right with God as early as possible in life — and very dangerous to assume that one will happen to have either the time or the will at the end of one's life to convert to God from sin. It is the end product of a person's life that makes the real difference, that is the "bottom line" of a life's evaluation (Mat 10:22; 22:13; Mark 4:1-20). (Douglas Stuart. The Preacher's Commentary on Ezekiel. (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1988, 2003), pp. 161-162.)

Does this mean that believers who sin lose their salvation? Absolutely not! Believers never reach a state of perfection in this life. They do not reach the point where they never sin. We all fall short of God's holy perfection every day of our lives. There is never a moment when we do not come "short of God's glory" (Rom 3:23) in both thought and behaviour. As long as our corruptible bodies live in this corrupted world, we will never even come close to the perfect righteousness of God. No matter how good we become or how many *good works* we do, our goodness and good works will never make us righteous. In God's eyes *true righteousness* means perfection. Therefore, in and of themselves, not even true believers can claim to possess *true righteousness*. As long as we live, all believers — no matter how good we may be — are just as dependent on Christ for righteousness as we were on the day we trusted Him for salvation.

God does not save and accept us because of our own goodness or good works. He saves and accepts us because of Christ's righteousness (2 Col 5:21). When Christ walked on earth, He lived a perfect life, never sinning in thought or deed. He fulfilled the law perfectly. He was the very embodiment of righteousness. As the *Ideal Righteousness*, His righteousness can stand for the righteousness of every human being. Therefore when people trust Christ as their Saviour, God credits the righteousness of Christ to them. This does not mean that they will become perfect and never sin. But it does mean that when they do sin, the *principle of confession* kicks in. Believers confess their sin, and God forgives them because they truly trust Christ for forgiveness and sincerely seek to honour Him by keeping His commandments.

The point is simply this: people's righteous deeds do not save them. But if a person has been truly saved, he loves the LORD and wants to please Him by obeying Him and living righteously.

3. Ezekiel concludes by describing the people's strong reaction to the laws governing repentance and apostasy. They charged God with being unjust (vv. 25-29). But God posed a question for them to consider: Was He the one who was unjust, or were they themselves unjust?

In no uncertain terms, God declares that His law governing apostasy is just and fair in every detail (v. 26). If righteous people turn away from God and continually live

in sin, they will suffer eternal death. They will die because they continued in sin and never repented, proving that they had made a false profession.

God also declares that His law governing repentance is just and fair in every detail. If wicked people repent and live righteously, they will have an abundant life, both now and eternally. They will not die.

The conclusion is evident: God's way is just and fair in every detail. It is the ways of the people that are unjust (v. 29). God stresses the importance of this fact by emphasizing it for a second time.

4. In closing this message, the LORD makes an earnest plea to the people (vv. 30-32). He has made a case for individual accountability to Him, a case so strong that it leaves every human being, whether Jew or Gentile, inexcusable before Him. The LORD challenges the people to do six things:

- => Know that He is going to judge each person according to his or her behaviour (v. 30).
- => Turn away from sin and back to Him.
- => Cast away all sin and get a new heart and a new spirit (v. 31; 11:19-20; 36:26-27).
- => Ask themselves why they should die when they could live.
- => Know that God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone (v. 22).
- => Repent and live!

Thought 1. If people turn away from the LORD, rejecting Him and living a wicked lifestyle, they will face God's terrifying judgment. No matter what people profess, if they live wickedly, their sinful life proves that their profession is false. They live by the works of the flesh and not by the Spirit of God. Such people are doomed to be eternally separated from God.

Gal 5:19-21 *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

1 Tim 4:1 *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.*

2 Tim 4:3-4 *For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*

Heb 3:8-12 *Do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested and tried me, though for forty years they saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation; I said, 'Their*

hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways. 'So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.' See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

Heb 6:4-6 *It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.*

2 Pet 2:20-22 *If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud."*

1 John 2:18-19 *Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. ■*