

## PREACHING TO THE EXILES

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 147

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 18

### EZEKIEL 18:1–9, 30–32

<sup>1</sup> The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup> “What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:

“The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’?

<sup>3</sup> “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. <sup>4</sup> For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.

<sup>5</sup> “Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right.

<sup>6</sup> He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor’s wife or have sexual relations with a woman during her period.

<sup>7</sup> He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan.

He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry

and provides clothing for the naked.

<sup>8</sup> He does not lend to them at interest or take a profit from them.

He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between two parties.

<sup>9</sup> He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

.....

<sup>30</sup> “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. <sup>31</sup> Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”



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### KEY VERSE

*“Everyone belongs to me, the parent as well*

as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.” —Ezekiel 18:4

## PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD’S COVENANT

### Unit 3: Courageous Prophets of Change

LESSONS 9–13

#### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Quote the mistaken proverb the exiles believed.
2. Explain the reasons for the exiles’ misconception regarding how God judges people.
3. Evaluate his or her preparedness to identify, avoid, and correct blame-shifting.

#### LESSON OUTLINE

##### Introduction

##### A. Imagined Righteousness

##### B. Lesson Context

- I. A Proverb (Ezekiel 18:1–4)
  - A. Repeated by the People (vv. 1–2)  
*Selective Hearing*
  - B. Refuted by God (vv. 3–4)
- II. A Case Study (Ezekiel 18:5–9)
  - A. A Man’s Actions (vv. 5–9a)
  - B. God’s Verdict (v. 9b)
- III. A Call (Ezekiel 18:30–32)

##### A. To Repent (vv. 30–31)

##### B. To Live (v. 32)

##### *Autonomy*

##### Conclusion

##### A. Actual Righteousness

##### B. Prayer

##### C. Thought to Remember

### HOW TO SAY IT

Adonai (Hebrew)	Ad-owe-nye.
Canaanite	Kay-nun-ite.
Elohim (Hebrew)	(Hebrew) El-o-heem.
Jehoiachin	Jeh-hoy-uh-kin.
Kebar	Kee-bar.
Yahweh (Hebrew)	Yaw-way.

### Introduction

#### A. Imagined Righteousness

The phrase *vicarious nostalgia* refers to a feeling of yearning for a past that one never actually lived. This term could describe a person born in the 1980s who loves a 1950s aesthetic and thinks of those years as simpler and better in many ways. It can describe a desire to return to “the good old days” that didn’t actually happen the way one imagines or even remembers.

For years, Garrison Keillor hosted a popular radio show in which he told touching and humorous stories about the citizens of a small fictional town in Minnesota. Each week he closed his program with the familiar sign-off, “Well, that’s the news from Lake

Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” These descriptions are obviously caricatures, meant to capture a feeling of community pride more than an attainable reality. Yet, a place like Lake Wobegon can inspire vicarious nostalgia for all of us who live more complicated lives than the strong women, good-looking men, and brilliant children of that town.

An overstated self-assessment is dangerous enough in nostalgia. However, lacking a correct view of oneself is a devastating flaw. In this week’s lesson, the exiles didn’t understand their own role in the difficult situation the nation was facing. They assigned fault to their parents while claiming their own moral innocence.

## B. Lesson Context

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, prophesied during and after the final chaotic years of the kingdom of Judah. He was called by God “in the fourth month on the fifth day ... the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin” ([Ezekiel 1:1–2](#)). Jehoiachin reigned only three months in 597 BC before the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took him, along with thousands of the most prominent and skilled people of Judah, to Babylon ([2 Kings 24:14](#)). This detail dates the beginning of Ezekiel’s book in 592 BC.

The group of deportees included the prophet Ezekiel ([Ezekiel 1:1–3](#)). The ruin of Jerusalem was devastating for the exiles. Jeremiah’s book of Lamentations captures

the anguish that the destruction of the city and loss of human life caused (see [lesson 8](#)). Though some were left in Jerusalem and wider Judah, the survivors to whom Ezekiel spoke were those taken away to Babylon (see [lesson 8 Lesson Context](#)). They lived together by the river Kebar.

The Babylonian exile created great uncertainty about the people’s relationship with God. Could God, who had allowed his holy city to be ravaged and his people carried into exile, still care for the people? And if he still cared, could he actually *take* care of them in a foreign nation?

## I. A Proverb ([EZEKIEL 18:1–4](#))

### A. Repeated by the People (vv. 1–2)

#### 1. The word of the LORD came to me:

*The word of the Lord* is a common phrase used in Ezekiel to emphasize that the Lord spoke to his prophet. This phrase occurs dozens of times in this book—far more often than in any other Bible book. Its frequent use in Ezekiel emphasizes that God communicated with his people even in exile. His continuing to speak to Ezekiel was meant in part to reassure the people that God was still with them in a foreign land.

### SELECTIVE HEARING

My son was playing a video game. At the door of his room, I shouted, “Turn that noise down!”

No response. That’s when it dawned on

me: he couldn't hear. *That's why he doesn't always do what I ask him!* I thought.

I went into the kitchen to look up the number of an audiologist as I popped the tab of a cold soda. I didn't get the cola to my lips before I heard my son shout, "Would you bring me one too?" He couldn't hear me ask to turn down the noise, but he heard a soda-can tab from two rooms away! He didn't have an auditory problem; he had selective hearing.

But don't we all? We only hear fully what we want to hear. Like teenagers with parents, we can selectively ignore the word of the Lord. Are you *really* listening to God?

—C. T.

**2. "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?"**

As the exiles wallowed in the misery of their situation, now in its sixth or seventh year ([Ezekiel 8:1](#); [20:1](#)), they naturally tried to come to grips with the reason for it. In so doing, they landed on a *proverb* that became popular. A proverb is a short, pithy statement used to express a general truth in a memorable way. The prophet Jeremiah was also confronted with this same proverb in his situation back in Judea ([Jeremiah 31:29–30](#)).

The Targum, a first-century AD Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible, gives the meaning of the proverb: "The fathers sin, the children suffer." Therefore, *The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge* expresses the belief that those in exile

(the children) are unjustly bearing the punishment for the sins of earlier generations (the parents). Claiming that their problem is inherited, the exiles deny responsibility or guilt on their part.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What old sayings do you need to let go of? Who will hold you accountable for progress?

#### *Digging Deeper*

How does [Lamentations 5:7](#) (lesson 8); [Matthew 5:27–28](#); etc., illustrate a need to do so?

The proverb has some truth to it in that the sins of one generation can have lasting effects on the next. We may think of how children suffer today when a breadwinning parent is sent to jail for a crime. Ezekiel himself pointed out that the exile was the result of covenant unfaithfulness by many generations of Israelites ([Ezekiel 16](#)). God had revealed himself as the one "punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation" ([Exodus 20:5](#)). The exiles' ancestors were indeed guilty (example: [2 Kings 21:1–16](#)). But this generation had been expelled from the promised land because of their own sin.

### **B. Refuted by God (vv. 3–4)**

**3. "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel.**

The fact that the sins of one generation

have consequences for another is not the same as saying that God punishes an innocent group for the sins of a guilty group. Although there are times when the all-knowing and sovereign God deems this to be fitting, it is rare and certainly not the norm. The problem in today's text is that the exiles specifically apply their *proverb* to disavow any culpability for their situation. In so doing, they can claim that God is unjust in his dealings with them ([Ezekiel 18:25–29](#); [33:17–20](#)).

#### *What Do You Think?*

In what ways will the truism in [Proverbs 26:9](#) guide your use and non-use of maxims?

#### *Digging Deeper*

What foundational problem do you see when you compare these two old sayings: “Too many cooks spoil the broth” and “Many hands make light work”?

**4. “For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.**

Everyone belongs to God since he is the sovereign Creator. This included his chosen people as well as their Babylonian oppressors. His justice was not and is not limited by national borders (see [Ezekiel 25–32](#)). Therefore he has the right to declare that *the one who sins is the one who will die*. Each person is responsible to God for his or her own sin, and God will deal with each person individually. In giving the Israelites his law, God

commanded that “parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin” ([Deuteronomy 24:16](#)).

This principle applied to how God dealt with his exiled people. His judgments are fair and true. It was pointless for the exiles to insist on their innocence ([Romans 3:23](#)). The apostle Paul echoed Ezekiel's words by stating that “the wages of sin is death” ([6:23](#)).

## II. A Case Study

### ([EZEKIEL 18:5–9](#))

#### A. A Man's Actions (vv. 5–9a)

**5. “Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right.**

This verse sets up the first of three case studies. The second and third, in [Ezekiel 18:10–17](#), are not part of today's lesson text. For the hypothetical *man* introduced here to be *just* is another, parallel way of saying that he does *what is just and right*. It's interesting to note how rare it is for the Hebrew words translated “righteous,” “just,” and “right” to occur in the same verse; the only other place is [Jeremiah 23:5](#). Specifics follow.

**6a. “He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of Israel.**

Eating *at the mountain shrines* refers to participation in idolatrous cult practices that were common in the mountain regions (compare [2 Kings 23:1–8](#); contrast [21:1–3](#)). These high places featured altars, often dedicated to the worship of Canaanite deities such as Baal. To *look to the idols of Israel* was

to worship and seek help from false gods or to make an image of the true God for worship.

Proper love for God begins with worshipping no other gods (compare [Exodus 20:3–6](#)). The righteous person didn't turn to false gods for assistance. He or she remained dependent on God alone for health and protection.

The exiles were hundreds of miles away from the high places of their fathers' idols. But the exiles were surrounded by the countless deities of the Babylonians. The temptation of straying to other gods remained real, especially when the exiles considered their uncertainty regarding God's continuing care.

**6b. “He does not defile his neighbor’s wife or have sexual relations with a woman during her period.**

The just man also was careful to stay morally pure. The Law of Moses prohibited not only adultery ([Exodus 20:14](#)) but also intercourse during a woman's menstrual period ([Leviticus 15:19–33](#); [18:19](#)). The penalty for violation of the latter was that “both of them are to be cut off from their people” ([20:18](#)). Some suggest that the reason for this restriction was because of the special role of blood in atoning for sins, respecting certain rights of women, or to maintain ceremonial purity. Whatever the reason, the righteous man observed this statute as well.

**7. “He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing**

**for the naked.**

The righteous man also exhibits godly love toward others. Righteousness consists of more than merely doing no harm. A righteous or just person uses his or her resources to provide for the material needs of others ([James 2:15–16](#)). These examples are all forms of economic righteousness shown to the debtor and *the hungry* and *the naked*. These are representative of other needy neighbors as well.

We note that all the positive and negative actions addressed here are covered in the Law of Moses (see [Exodus 20:15](#); [21:2](#); [22:21, 26–27](#); [Deuteronomy 15:7–11](#); [23:19–20](#)). The righteous man never lies about or wrongs a neighbor for any reason, in careful obedience to [Deuteronomy 5:20–21](#). Rather, he keeps his distance from evil and all forms of judicial corruption ([16:19](#)). In short, such a man puts God's law above any opportunity to gain at the expense of another.

**8. “He does not lend to them at interest or take a profit from them. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between two parties.**

The economically vulnerable often found themselves (and still do today) in positions where they had no choice but to accept the terms of predatory lenders. God viewed the practice as evidence that his people had forgotten him ([Ezekiel 22:12](#)). He is the protector of the downtrodden, and he expected his people to be the same ([Psalm 82:3](#); [Proverbs 14:31](#)).

While the wicked people took advantage of the poor in various ways, the righteous

person in Israel did not charge *interest* on loans to fellow Israelites. And while interest could be charged to a foreigner, it still had to be restrained ([Deuteronomy 23:19–20](#)).

#### *What Do You Think?*

If your locality had a ballot initiative to limit interest rates charged on so-called payday loans, should this text be used to influence how Christians vote on it? Why, or why not?

#### *Digging Deeper*

How do [Matthew 25:27](#) and [Luke 19:23](#) influence your response, if at all? Why?

**9a.** “He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws.

Here we have a sparkling example of the parallelism that is a hallmark of Hebrew poetry: *follows* is another way of saying *keeps*. Likewise, God’s *decrees* are the same as his *laws*. These same two sets of parallels of the underlying Hebrew terms are also found in [Ezekiel 11:20](#); [18:9](#); [20:19, 21](#); [37:24](#). Comprehensively, the righteous person does not follow the selfish, sinful ways of others in any respect.

#### **B. God’s Verdict (v. 9b)**

**9b.** “That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

God will not judge or punish the *righteous* person for the sins of others—period. We may note in passing that the capitalization in the phrase *the Sovereign LORD* indicates different Hebrew words than does that in the

phrase “the LORD ... God” as the latter occurs in, for example, [Ezekiel 20:5b](#). There are three single-word Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament: Yahweh, Adonai, and Elohim. The phrases “the Sovereign LORD” and “the LORD ... God” indicate different combinations of these names.

### **III. A Call** **(EZEKIEL 18:30–32)**

#### **A. To Repent (vv. 30–31)**

**30–31a.** “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed,

What follows recalls Solomon’s prayer that God would forgive the people of their sins and heal their land when they repented ([2 Chronicles 6:36–39](#)). Israel’s sense of national connectedness had diminished following the division into two kingdoms after Solomon’s death in 930 BC. A sense of moral responsibility for the sins of the community followed. However, the Scriptures insist that both guilt and salvation have a corporate aspect (example: [1 Corinthians 5:6–11](#)). Sinful characteristics are transmitted from generation to generation. But God affirmed that he would also judge each person individually, according to his or her walk before God.

This is important enough to restate in a

slightly different way. God said that he would judge the *Israelites* [plural, corporate aspect], *each of you according to your own ways* [individual aspect]. Although each person was responsible for his or her own guilt before the Lord, individual decisions affected the community as a whole. The collective singular *house of* shows that the covenant God had with Israel was corporate; it included the whole of Israel. The singular *each of you* shows that the overall moral tone of the community was formed on the collective choices of individuals. The Israelites were to look not at the conduct of their ancestors but to their own. The people were to rid themselves of any and all personal sin. To repent is to avoid the judgment of death that sin brings. God would be gracious and forgive all who turned to him in repentance.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What are some practical ways for Christians to be accountable to one another in keeping sin in the rearview mirror?

#### *Digging Deeper*

Which kinds of biblical texts most help you in letting go of sin: texts that stress the positive results of doing so, or texts that stress the negative result for not doing so?

**31b. “and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel?”**

Those in the generation experiencing exile were worthy of the judgment that also could have fallen on the prior generation.

However, God was equally clear that condemnation wasn't inevitable. He defined repentance as the rejection of one's past sinful ways, and he appealed to the *people of Israel* to accept *a new heart and a new spirit*. God had already promised to do this ([Ezekiel 11:19](#)).

God's rhetorical question *Why will you die?* meant that the sentence of death was not inevitable since God extended an offer of forgiveness through repentance. Each individual had the freedom to choose life or death. If the people did not have free will, then they would not have been responsible. People are capable of knowing right from wrong, and God deals with us on that basis. The blame for one's sin and judgment cannot be shifted to God, Satan, nature, nurture, parents, or circumstances.

## **B. To Live (v. 32)**

**32. “For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”**

God takes *no pleasure* in the destruction of his creation ([Ezekiel 33:11](#)). He wants to deliver people from their unfaithfulness and *the death* that it brings. He judges, but he also provides all people with the means of salvation, so they can avoid that judgment. God issues an invitation to repent and live, as he has done so many times before. He demonstrates love by his willingness to set people free from their sinful past and the punishment they deserve ([John 3:16](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#)). Yet he demonstrates his holiness by not



allowing sin to continue indefinitely.

## AUTONOMY

I find the reality of autonomous vehicles terrifying. Thinking about it causes me to remember a joke from the days when aviation was young.

A passenger airplane had reached its cruising altitude. A recorded message came over the speakers, reminding the passengers to keep their seat belts on. That was followed by an announcement: “The captain will soon come back to greet you. Don’t worry, the plane is on automatic pilot, and nothing can go wrong, nothing can go wrong, nothing can go wrong ...”

Autonomous cars. Autonomous planes. Autonomous people. We are constantly in the presence of men and women who have wrested their lives from God and are moving forward on autopilot. How often are we numbered among them as we fight for control that is rightly only God’s? Only by repenting and turning back to God with our whole lives can we expect to be forgiven our sins and live fully.

—C. T.

## Conclusion

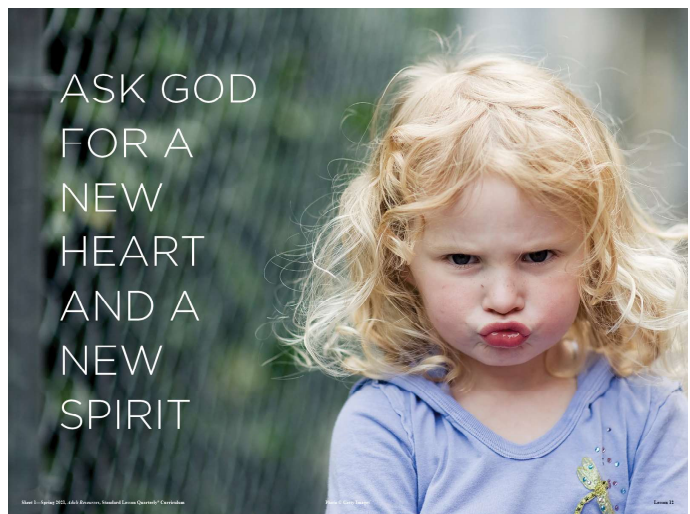
### A. Actual Righteousness

The exiles imagined themselves to be the victims of a cosmic injustice. They viewed themselves as serving a sentence intended for the prior generation. The history of God’s people reveals that they had always been

incapable of keeping the covenant. Before Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai, Aaron had already constructed the gold calf and led the people into idolatry. The book of Judges outlines the nation’s checkered history of obeying God.

The exiles were not unique in their ability to view themselves as morally superior to the prior generation. Jesus called out similar duplicity in the Pharisees, who insisted that if they had been alive at the time of the prophets, they would not have murdered them ([Matthew 23:30](#)). Indeed, they had already plotted to kill Jesus ([12:14](#)). The apostle Paul’s words “Let God be true, and every human being a liar” ([Romans 3:4](#)) fit well in Ezekiel’s defense of God’s justice.

The hearts of the people were always incapable of obeying God fully. So God promised a new creative act: he would give the people new hearts, ones capable of being sensitive and obedient to God’s Word.



Visual for Lesson 12. Point to this visual to introduce a contrast between maturity levels of God’s intent (v. 31) and people’s proverb (v. 2).

This truth was intended to prevent Ezekiel's audience from slipping into the despair or apathy that came with believing they were the victims of their parents' decisions. Each person was charged with the responsibility of turning from his or her sinful ways and returning to God, in order that they would avoid being destroyed by the consequences of their own sins. This is ultimately fulfilled through following Jesus in the plan of salvation. Those who do so receive the Holy Spirit, who daily recreates our hearts and minds to be like Christ.

#### *What Do You Think?*

Which thought in today's text do you have the hardest time coming to grips with? Why?

#### *Digging Deeper*

What extra effort will you expend to resolve this uncertainty?

### **B. Prayer**

God, we see moral goodness in ourselves, but you see your image marred with sin. We confess that your assessment of our situation is correct. We thank you for providing mercy and renewal. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

If we cannot acknowledge God's judgment, we will see no need to receive his forgiveness.

## **INVOLVEMENT LEARNING**

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

### **Into the Lesson**

Divide the class in half; for larger classes, subdivide the halves into fours. Ask groups in one half to discuss problems they had to overcome because of how they were brought up. Ask the other half to discuss problems children today will need to overcome because of how they are being reared now.

Reconvene after five minutes and pose these questions: 1—Was this easy or difficult to discuss? 2—How common is it to blame parents for the inadequacies of their children? 3—How legitimate is it to do that? 4—What are instances when children flourished in spite of their parents?

Use responses to the last question as a transition to Bible study.

### **Into the Word**

Write on the board these three words as headers of three columns, one each:

*Relational / Psychological / Sinful*

After a class member reads aloud [Ezekiel 18:2](#) and [Jeremiah 31:29](#), say, "Realizing that God condemns this saying, how does it support and how is it different from the experiences we shared in our opening discussion?"

After each response, ask which heading it goes under and write it there.

Have learners go back into the groups above. Instruct groups to make a list of possibilities implied by this starter: *How to know if a person is lawful and right*. After five minutes, have groups report; write their conclusions on the board. For clarification, note how this list of behaviors is repeated in verses 10–13 and 15–17. Ask learners to read verses 30–32 and summarize in one sentence the truth expressed there. Compare and contrast those summaries as a class.

*Option:* Distribute copies of the “Sins of the Fathers” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Use the “jot three steps” instruction as a transition to Into Life.

## Into Life

Return class members to their groups and ask each group to discuss one of the following scenarios, which you have reproduced on handouts:

1—I was ashamed to go to church my whole life because everyone there knew about my father’s problems. They knew about the bills he didn’t pay. They knew about the money he’d embezzled from his company before he was fired and spent years in jail because of this crime. They’d heard the rumors about his secret girlfriends. They’d suspected that his “business trips” to Nevada and New York were really just covers for drinking, gambling, and womanizing. My father never told me he was sorry for any of that; I was deeply humiliated. His reputation

splashed onto me, and I felt sure that people were talking about my family behind my back whenever I showed up at youth group or worship.

2—I was in church several times a week when I was growing up at home. My dad was an elder. My mom was a member of the missions committee. We had visiting guest speakers in our home all the time, and we spent summer vacations at a Christian camp where my parents were workers. As soon as I could get away from all this churchiness, I did. Now that I’m older, I can see why religion was important to my folks, but that doesn’t mean I have time for it. I want something different than what my parents had. And besides, I was baptized when I was 10. I figure that that and all those hours I spent in church activities pretty well seals my future with God.

How does today’s Scripture help us decide how to respond to either?

After a few minutes, ask groups to share their conclusions with the whole class. Possible questions to pose:

1—When are you most susceptible to blaming your upbringing for your current behavior?

2—When are you most tempted to believe that your “family faith” is good enough in God’s eyes?

3—How do you solve these two problems?