

“Reflection”

Reading: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Matthew 21:23-32

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Today our Scripture readings point us to one of my greatest talents. In fact, I could probably be an Olympic medalist in this sport, if only the competition wasn't so fierce. I could fill a gallery with this art, if only the galleries weren't already filled. Don't be too impressed, though, because you're probably pretty good at it, too. It is the art of deflection, missing the point, passing the buck, diffusing the responsibility. I'm *so* good at this, and you probably are, too. *I* didn't do it. It's not *my* fault. We learn from a very early age that it can save a lot of time and trouble for me if everything bad that happens is someone else's fault. We become experts at understanding and analyzing our own good intentions, no matter how bad the results, while simultaneously assigning the worst of intentions to everyone else. If I make a mess of it, it was just a mistake or an accident; could have happened to anybody. If *you* make a mess of it, you're clumsy and lazy and spiteful.

People who study human behavior have long understood that you can get people to do (or not do) all kinds of things if you give them a way of rationalizing that it's someone else's fault or responsibility. It's an important part of how the military functions: in order to get soldiers to overcome their natural reluctance to kill, you have them operate as a group commanded by an officer, so the responsibility for killing is diffused from the individual and shared by the group and commanded by a superior. Or, from what I understand, back when executions were carried out by firing squads, it was not uncommon for one of the executioners to be firing a blank, but nobody knew who it was. That way, everyone on the line could think they were firing a blank and didn't actually kill the prisoner; everyone else did it. Or if you're ever in trouble out in the world, your chances of getting someone to help you decrease in proportion to the number of people around you: the bigger the crowd, the more everyone assumes it's someone else's responsibility to help.

It's extremely natural for us. Humans are social creatures, so we want to look good in front of others and we want to think well of ourselves in comparison to others. It's easy to see other people doing it, but it's not always so easy to recognize in yourself. This matters for us today because it has such an impact on what God is trying to do in our lives. Your walk with God is not just between you and God. God calls us not only to Himself; He also calls us into community with one another in His name and in His presence, and so understanding ourselves rightly in relationship to one another is critical to walking with Christ. But the problem is that we deflect responsibility, and we refuse to see ourselves rightly, and therefore our views of God, ourselves, and others are skewed.

That's the heart of the problem in both of our passages of Scripture for this morning. The prophet Ezekiel is preaching during a time of massive upheaval for his people. God had given the Israelites a homeland as a part of His covenant relationship with them; the plan was that God would live with His people in this land. But over many generations, the people persisted in following other gods, and so the true God, true to His word, removed them from the land. Ezekiel is living in exile in Babylon, preaching the word of God to his fellow exiles as well as to the remnants of the Israelites that still live in their own land.

Through Ezekiel, we have preserved for us something of a conversation taking place between God and some of the Israelites. God's people are making a complaint about their situation, and really

the complaint is a very old one and very common one that has a lot to do with the problem of evil. Why do bad things happen, and more specifically, why do bad things happen to me when I don't think I've done anything to deserve it? The issue is that God has made a covenant with this nation, and the nation hasn't held up their end of the arrangement. God is patient, though, so He has held off the consequences of their rebellion for quite a while. But by Ezekiel's time, the consequences are coming, and the entire nation is facing exile. But you can almost imagine a light bulb going on in some of their heads as they come up with a new theological argument. The thinking goes like this: this exile is coming about because of the sins of all of the generations that came before us, so it's not really our fault. The parents ate the sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. They did the deed, but we're the ones feeling the effects. Therefore, they're arguing, God is not being just, and we don't deserve to go into exile.

Deflection. What's happening isn't our fault, it's the fault of those who went before us. And in some ways that's in keeping with one of the dominant theological themes of the time, that the sins of one generation can continue to impact following generations. We even see it happening today, when a parent makes a stupid choice that has terrible consequences, and sometimes those consequences can damage their children and grandchildren, perpetuating cycles of despair and addiction and abuse for generations. But Ezekiel comes back at them with what was a somewhat new theological viewpoint: the soul that sins shall die. You can't diffuse this responsibility throughout the generations; you've got your own junk to take the blame for. There's individual accountability. Before you start looking for ways to pin the blame for your current situation on those who went before you, you need to consider whether you've played any part in it.

God takes their deflection of responsibility and reflects it right back at them. Don't blame God for being unjust, Israelites, when in fact you've made your own choices and persist in your own rebellion. Deal with your own junk before you start worrying about other peoples' junk. It is this quality of reflecting on our own sins that throws wide the gates of the kingdom and prepares the way for God to do the amazing work of repentance and forgiveness and crafting us into holy people. "If a wicked person turns away from the wickedness they have committed and does what is just and right, they will save their life," God promises. "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? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone. Repent and live!"

It's the same basic question in slightly different terms during the ministry of Jesus. The passage we read today comes just after Matthew's gospel tells us of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. After several years of teaching and preaching in the country, this unsettling young rabbi and contender for the title of Messiah is now making a public appearance in the capital city during one of the religious high points of the year, so everyone's wondering what He will do. What He does, in fact, is march straight into the Temple and stir everything up by chasing out the vendors who are taking advantage of worshippers. Rather than continue to stir up trouble, though, He leaves town and spends the night in a suburb. The next day, the religious leaders ask Him, in essence, "Just who do you think you are, that you come to the Temple and do this sort of thing? By what authority are you doing these things?"

But Jesus knows that their question is really a deflection. Rather than dealing with the reality Jesus just unmasked — that the religious authorities have become complicit in making religious

worship a commodity — they are instead trying to stoke outrage that anyone would dare be so disruptive. Rather than dealing with the issue, they are trying to shift the focus onto whether Jesus has the right to raise the issue. Jesus says, in effect, that He won't play their game: He uses wit and knowledge of the political situation to get them to drop their question, which He knows is intended to trap Him.

But then He gets to the heart of the issue by taking their deflection and reflecting it back at them: they ask Him, “who do you think you are?” and His response is to tell a story and ask them, “All right, who do you think *you* are in this story?” One son dishonors his father by defying him at first, but then goes and does what he's asked. The other son submits to his father in word, but then dishonors him in deed by failing to follow through. The point is clear: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes” — the worst of the sinners, in other words — “are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you,” you people who think you've got it all together. It is the willingness to reflect upon one's own sin and then repent of it that opens wide the gates of the kingdom. Those who make a habit of deflecting the blame tend to lack that humility.

It's the same thing Ezekiel was dealing with. The end is up to you. Why will you die, people of Israel? You have the choice before you; make the right one. Don't try to push the blame onto someone else. The point is not to say that everything bad that happens to us happens because we have done something to deserve it; that is not what Ezekiel or Jesus are saying. They're not telling us to take the blame for *everything*, and it's not true that every bad thing that happens is a direct punishment for some sin, and so people who are suffering must have done something to deserve it. No, the point is that when we come to God, we need to be willing to honestly reflect upon our own lives, listening carefully for what God is saying to us through His Spirit about what we need to confess and repent of. It's not a question of who bears the burden of blame for a broken relationship or a sinful practice or a stumbling walk with God, it's a question of what are we going to do now? Blame lies in the past and can't be changed; repentance is in the future and matters for eternity.

We come to God half-honestly, promising one thing with our mouths but doing very different things with our lives. We promise to give our lives to God, when in fact what we often do is use God's rules as yet another tool for passing judgment on other people. In reality, coming to God is the best chance we're going to get for judging ourselves rightly, for really understanding who we are and what we're for and how we can be what we were meant to be.

Honestly, those people who can never accept any sort of blame are kind of sad. People who do nothing but pass the buck just seem small and deluded. We've all seen the sorts of apologies that those kinds of people come up with, whether they're people you know personally or celebrities or public figures. Sometimes they apologize by saying, “I'm sorry that people were offended by this,” or “I'm sorry that this information came to light.” What that really means that they're not sorry for what they did; they're sorry that they got caught. President Truman famously had a sign on his desk saying, “The buck stops here.” No more passing the buck.

Confession and repentance and reflection on what we've really done are beautiful things, though they can be painful. As we draw near to Christ, we are revealed for who and what we really are in the light of His holiness, and as we see Him we worship Him, and worshipping Him means that we stop worshipping ourselves. This humility and poverty of spirit is what opens wide the gates of His

kingdom, and we are invited in. So today, take the time to sincerely reflect upon your life and listen for how God is calling you to confess. Confession has a negative connotation to it, but in reality it is a beautiful thing, because it is the truth. If there are areas in your life today where you have been passing the blame or avoiding the truth and you need to confess it to God, don't let the opportunity pass.

Benediction: Good and upright is the LORD; therefore He instructs sinners in His ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way. Go and walk in the way of the Lord.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)