



"Although the connections are not always obvious, personal change is inseparable from social and political change."

—Harriet Lerner

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Refuting a False Proverb

Every culture creates and passes on bits of common [wisdom](#). These sayings—whether they are called proverbs, adages, aphorisms, maxims, or even saws—concentrate prudent thought and behavior into witty or picturesque phrases that are easy to remember and quote to the next generation. An English-speaking person simply absorbs these as he or she learns the language: "Honesty is the best policy." "Don't judge a book by its cover." "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." "Don't bite the hand that feeds you." "Two wrongs don't make a right." The English language features hundreds of such sayings.

Because these adages are so commonplace and well-known, most people tend not to question them. They roll off the tongue with little thought about their truth and validity. Most of them contain a measure of truth and wisdom in the proper context, but a few of them seem true and wise only until we scrutinize them more deeply. For instance, "Practice makes perfect" seems true until one realizes that even 10,000 hours of practice doing something in a wrong way will not produce perfection. This shortcoming in the maxim is why its modern version reads, "Perfect practice makes perfect."

Some proverbial sayings contradict others. For instance, "The pen is mightier than the sword" and "Actions speak louder than words" give essentially opposing advice. Weighing these together, is it better to write or speak or to act? Which of the two pieces of wisdom the individual chooses to follow depends on the particular situation at hand. Most of the time, we intuitively grasp the nuanced meanings of these proverbs, but they do not always convey the right messages.

In the book of Ezekiel, [God](#) exposes the falsehood behind a common Israelite proverb:

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." ([Ezekiel 18:1-2](#))

The setting of the book of Ezekiel provides the necessary background for God's denunciation of this common saying (also denounced in [Jeremiah 31:29](#)). The closest time marker in the text before this prophecy is found in [Ezekiel 8:1](#): "in the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month." The next time marker appears in [Ezekiel 20:1](#): "in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month." God's directive to the prophet about this proverb occurred sometime within these two dates, that is, between September 592 and August 591 BC. Nebuchadnezzar, having conquered Judah and Jerusalem in 604 BC, had taken many of its people into captivity. However, some Jews remained in the land, Zedekiah still reigned as a puppet king, and the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple would not occur for another five years, in 586 BC.

Since King Josiah's death at the Battle of Megiddo in 609 BC, Judah had been in an almost constant state of rebellion, war, destruction, and captivity. The best and the brightest among them, like Daniel and his three friends, had been marched off to Babylon after Jerusalem initially fell to Nebuchadnezzar, and another ten thousand, Ezekiel and King Jehoiachin among them, were carried away in 597 BC. Living conditions within the kingdom were not good and getting worse. The writing was on the wall that she would soon fall.

What were the people of Judah saying to each other in the streets about the calamities that had [afflicted](#) them for nearly a generation? "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." What did they mean by this? Essentially, "It's not my fault things are so bad." Moreover, they were pointing the finger of blame at earlier generations, complaining that they had to bear the punishment for their forefathers' sins.

On its surface, the second commandment, which may be the misunderstood source of this false proverb, seems to support their complaint: "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me" ([Exodus 20:5](#)). However, in the commandment, God does not mean that He metes out punishment for the father's sins on his descendants to the third and fourth generation but that the *effects* of [sin](#) will endure that long. The concluding phrase, "of those who hate Me," also modifies God's statement, explaining that the negative effects of sin continue and even compound in a family or society that perpetuates its enmity toward God (see [Romans 8:7](#)).

Even so, God's punishment for the sins of Judah was indeed a result of the Jews' cumulative sins—rebellion, idolatry, and Sabbath-breaking, among others (see Ezekiel 20). There was no injustice, however, in His handling of Judah's downfall. For one thing, He had consistently sent prophets to warn them (see [Jeremiah 44:4](#)), and they had not repented. For another, the generations alive during Judah's decline and fall were just as sinful—if not more so—than their predecessors. Ezekiel 16 colorfully illustrates this fact, showing Judah's sins to have outstripped Israel's and even Sodom's and Gomorrah's! So, God declares, "And as for Me also, My eye will neither spare, nor will I have pity, but I will recompense their deeds on their own head" ([Ezekiel 9:10](#)).

Throughout Ezekiel 18, God patiently explains His just and [merciful](#) approach toward sin and [repentance](#). It is encapsulated in the pithy statement that appears twice in the explanation: "The soul who sins shall die" ([Ezekiel 18:4](#), 20). He punishes no child for his father's sins, nor does he punish the father for the child's sins. Each person bears his own guilt, and if he does not seek forgiveness and repent, he will die in those sins. But if he sees his father's wickedness and lives righteously, God says, "He shall surely live!" (

[Ezekiel 18:14-17](#)). He concludes the chapter with an appeal to the people: "‘Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. . . . For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,’ says the Lord God. ‘Therefore turn and live!’" ([Ezekiel 18:30](#), 32).

Today, it is easy for us to say, "The Baby Boomers ruined America!" or "The Gen-Xers are the reason everything unraveled!" We even hear, "Those lazy, entitled Millennials will be the death of this nation!" The finger of blame often points, not toward another generation, but at another group: a political party, an ethnic group, a minority, or a sexual orientation. Sadly, most people will blame anyone and everyone but themselves.

We must learn the lesson of God's refutation of the false proverb: Everyone is responsible for his own sin, so the key to turning a life, a family, a church, or a nation around is individual repentance. We can only blame ourselves and change ourselves.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by Charles Whitaker

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