



Lesson Overview

Week of May 23

1 Life Need:

Discuss why we do and don't want to take responsibility for our actions.

2 Bible Learning:

Study Ezekiel's message about God's personal judgment on our actions.

Suggested Material:

■ *Adult Teacher's Resource Kit:* Poster and reproducible hand-out—God's Faithful Prophets

3 Bible Application:

Explore why taking responsibility for our actions is essential.

Suggested Material:

■ *Adult Teacher's Resource Kit:* Reproducible handout—Own What's Yours

4 Life Response:

Accept responsibility for your actions.

Church/Home Theme:
Revive Us Again,
O Lord!

Lesson Focus:
Take responsibility for your actions, good and bad.

Lesson Scripture:
Ezekiel 18:1-9,
30-32

Ezekiel: Street Preacher to the Exiles

The Blamers—When Ezekiel preached to the exiles, they responded with clichés that showed they took no responsibility for their troubles. A favorite saying referred to the older generation eating sour grapes, which resulted in the younger generation's suffering. This group of Israelites blamed their present adverse circumstances on the forefathers—they were unjustly punished for the sins of the previous generation. But Ezekiel said that each person has to stand before God and take responsibility for his or her actions. God was not unfair and unjust. The Lord punishes people for their sin, as they deserve it. God created all human beings and gives us every breath we take.

The Righteous—Ezekiel said that any person who lives uprightly is under no condemnation. That includes whoever eats no food offered to idols nor worships idols, has no illicit sexual relations, respects the laws concerning ritual purity, obeys Moses' law, refrains from robbery or violence, and is charitable. They are honoring God.

The Invitation—God gives out consequences according to the ways of each person. God is not up in heaven, deciding to bless someone based on previous family members' behavior. Nor is suffering placed on a person because of the actions of an earlier generation. It's essential for each person to repent and make things right with God. He is not a killjoy, wanting our lives to be miserable, fearing His big stick every time a law is violated. He takes no delight in the suffering of sinners. He wants none to perish, but rather for everyone to come into a right relationship with Him. That's the personal invitation God extends to everyone.

As Your Students Arrive

Ask students to think about a time they happily said, "Yes, I did that!" For example, it might be taking credit for a good grade they made in school years ago or for a piece of furniture they built or for a car they fixed themselves. Then ask why we like to take credit and responsibility for the good things we do.

Link to Last Week: Ask some of your students if they would like to share how they listened to God this past week.

1 Life Need

Discuss why we do and don't want to take responsibility for our actions.

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Ezekiel: Street Preacher to the Exiles

D'Marco is a Christian. He's just going through a phase now," said Gerrika. She and her pastor's wife, Ladona, were driving to the county jail to bail out her 19-year-old son. D'Marco had been arrested for driving while intoxicated.

"I think they've lowered the legal alcohol limit anyway," Gerrika told Ladona. "I mean, a person can't take a little sip of alcohol these days."

Ladona had seen D'Marco only a few times since Gerrika start attending their church five years ago. Ladona had heard a little about D'Marco's various problems from his mother mentioning them as prayer requests at women's meetings.

"He's a teenager, doing what teenagers do," Gerrika had told the group of women.

"Gerrika," Ladona said from the passenger seat of the car, "is D'Marco a Christian?"

"Oh goodness, yes," Gerrika said. "I drug him to the altar and made him repeat the sinner's prayer when he was 13, and I made him get baptized. I told him if I'm going to heaven, then he is too!"

Gerrika said quietly, "I had to do that. He's all I got."

"Gerrika," Ladona said softly. "D'Marco belongs to the Lord first. D'Marco has to choose God for himself. He has to be responsible for himself and his own sins. You cannot try to cover your son's sins. Only the blood of Jesus can do that."

1. When do you want to take responsibility for what you do?

2. When do you not want to take responsibility?

3. Why do we need to take responsibility for all our actions?

LESSON FOCUS: Take responsibility for your actions, good and bad.

Have the students read the anecdote in the student book and then form small groups to answer **Questions 1, 2, and 3.**

For Question 1, we like to take responsibility for things that are favorable to us, that show us in a positive light. For example, when people compliment us for something we've done, we're happy to say, "Yes, I did that."

Question 2 reminds us that we're less happy to accept responsibility for our mistakes when we do things we're ashamed of—things that hurt our image. We like to make excuses or blame someone else for things we have done that would cause us trouble or embarrass us.

For Question 3, taking responsibility often means being humble and honest with others. It gives us integrity, and it's the right thing to do. God would want us to admit our mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Also, if you can admit being responsible for your actions, you may be able to fix certain situations that you have caused rather than always accusing someone else.

2 Bible Learning

Study Ezekiel's message about God's personal judgment on our actions.



On the poster sheet, read the eighth paragraph, then on the poster point out the engraving

by Gustave Doré of Ezekiel exhorting the people to follow the Lord.

A FALSE PROVERB REFUTED

Read together Ezekiel 18:1-4, then discuss these important ideas in the Scripture:

BIBLE EXTRA

Ezekiel in Exile

Ezekiel, whose name means “God strengthens,” was the son of Buzi, a priest of the family of Zadok (Ezek. 1:3). What is known about Ezekiel's life comes from the information he gives in his book. Also, his prophecies contain dates more specific than almost any others in the Old Testament. This makes it possible to correlate Ezekiel's declarations with Babylonian records and date many of the prophet's oracles (for example, 1:1-3; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 29:1; 30:20; 33:21; 40:1). Ezekiel was among the Jews taken to Babylon in the second of three deportations in 597 B.C. The Lord called him to be a prophet in 593, and his prophecies were proclaimed from then until 571.

Throughout Ezekiel's ministry, he tried to help his fellow exiles deal with being so far from their homeland. He taught them that the Lord was nearby to sustain them during their time of displacement. Ezekiel's messages, like those of Jeremiah, fall into three major categories: declarations against Israel, especially before the fall of Jerusalem; pronouncements against the nations, such as Egypt and Tyre; and words of consolation for Israel's future, including visions of a restored nation and a new temple.

• Through Ezekiel, the Lord denounced a common proverb about sour grapes that meant this generation was suffering for the sins of previous generations.

• The prophet gave the people God's solemn word: He did not punish the innocent for the sins of the guilty.

• He created all people, and everyone is responsible to Him for his or her actions.

• Therefore, only the one who sins will die for his or her sins.

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A False Proverb Refuted

Ezekiel 18:1-4, KJV

1 The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying,

2 What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?

3 As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel.

4 Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

Ezekiel 18:1-4, NIV

¹The word of the LORD came to me: 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?’

³“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. ⁴For 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.”

In Ezekiel 18:1-4, we learn about a popular, yet false, saying that was circulating among the Jews in Jerusalem and Babylon. The “proverb” (vs. 2), which seems to be based on a misunderstanding of Exodus 20:5 and Numbers 14:18, meant that because of the sins of previous generations, the present generation was suffering. According to this logic, one generation could blame their troubles on the sins of previous generations. Even more distressing, it meant that God was punishing their generation for the sins their ancestors had committed.

The phrase “as surely as I live” (Ezek. 18:3) indicates that the Lord was making a solemn oath. Since there was no one greater than Him, He swore by His own life when He revealed His will. It was His desire that the Jews no longer use the proverb about intergenerational responsibility, for it represented the wrong view of how He executed justice. God does not punish the innocent for the sins of the guilty.

Furthermore, God was offended by His people hiding behind this lie. So, He declared that this widespread proverb would no longer be repeated. In verse 4, God announced



SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 4

God took issue with the notion that He was unjust in His treatment of His chosen people. Supposedly, while one generation lived in sin, the Lord directed His displeasure on the following generation. Allegedly, this remained the case, even though the parents' children were innocent of any wrongdoing.

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 5

God declared that He reigned sovereign over

every individual. They were each accountable to Him for their own actions. This included only the wicked being punished for their iniquity.

A RIGHTEOUS PERSON COMMENDED

Read together Ezekiel 18:5-9, then highlight these important concepts in the Scripture:

- God presented three hypothetical situations to Ezekiel. He talked about a righteous man (vss. 5-9), his son (vss. 10-13), and the man's grandson (vss. 14-18).
- The righteous man does not worship at the idol shrines, does not commit adultery, gives food and clothing to the poor, and does not cheat people.

that every person belonged to Him, including the parent and the child. As Creator, it was His unchanging will that guilt would not be transferred from one generation to the next. Only the person who sinned would die for his or her sins.

4. What was objectionable about the popular proverb the Lord censured?
5. How did God refute the false proverb?

A Righteous Person Commended

Ezekiel 18:5-9, KJV

5 But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right,
 6 And hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, neither hath defiled his neighbour's wife, neither hath come near to a menstruous woman,
 7 And hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment;
 8 He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true judgment between man and man,
 9 Hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept my

Ezekiel 18:5-9, NIV

⁵Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right.
⁶He 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.
⁷He 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.
⁸He 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.
⁹He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous;

BIBLE EXTRA

Faith and Righteous Deeds

In Ezekiel 18:5-9, there is a repeated emphasis on those who are "righteous" doing what is "just and right." Readers learn that the way in which people conduct their lives either validates or invalidates whatever claims they make about being "righteous."

The New Testament clarifies the nature of the relationship between faith and righteous deeds. On the one hand, people are "saved" (Eph. 2:8-9) by "grace" through "faith." On the other hand, the Father creates believers anew in the Son to "do good works" (vs. 10).

Similarly, James 1:27 discloses that the kind of belief that saves is a life-transforming faith, in which one's character and behavior are changed. This included remaining unpolluted by the moral filth of the world and reaching out to others in need. Likewise, 2:14-18 reveals that a truly active faith is vibrant, being characterized by concern and compassion for others.

In short, trusting in the Messiah is authenticated by doing kind deeds to others. When such faith is planted in the soil of kind acts, it has an opportunity to thrive.

• In summary, this man follows God’s laws, and because he does, he lives—that is, he will not suffer judgment for the sins of other people.

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 6

This verse describes righteousness as a right relationship with God. The righteous person daily demonstrates what righteousness is by doing “what is just and right” in the eyes of the Lord.

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 7

There are two kinds of sins to which the verse draws attention. The first centers on consuming pagan sacrifices at pagan mountain shrines, along with praying to false gods and goddesses. The second involved adultery and being physically intimate with a woman when she was menstruating.

BIBLE EXTRA

Choose Life!

In Ezekiel 18:32, the Creator declared that He found no delight in judging unrepentant, stubborn sinners. Instead, the God of Israel wanted them to forsake their wicked ways and experience life in all its fullness.

Two times earlier in the same chapter, the Lord emphasized similar truths. For instance, verse 21 puts forward the scenario in which wicked people stopped sinning, along with beginning to obey God’s Word. Rather than perish, they would be permitted to live. Likewise, in verse 23, the Lord revealed that He received no joy when the ungodly died. Instead, He wanted them to depart from their evil ways and preserve their lives.

The New Testament emphasizes similar points. For example, 1 Timothy 2:4 says that the Father desires everyone to trust in the Son for salvation and in this way come to know the “truth.” Similarly, 2 Peter 3:9 states that God remains “patient” (NIV) with everyone. His intent in doing so is that, rather than “perish” in their sins, people might turn away from their wickedness and experience eternal life.

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 8

These verses concern the equitable and humane treatment of others. For instance, there was no toleration for the exploitation of others. Likewise, justice between “two parties” was administered impartially. Moreover, instead of robbing the indigent, an effort was made to provide them with food and clothing.

GET A NEW HEART AND A NEW SPIRIT

Finally, read Ezekiel 18:30-32, then emphasize these key ideas in the text as you discuss it with your students:

- The Israelites accused the Lord of being unfair

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KJV
judgments, to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord God.

NIV
he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

The overriding truth in Ezekiel 18 is that people are held responsible for their own sin, and that guilt is not transferred across generations. To illustrate this fact, God presented three hypothetical situations. He talked about a man (vss. 5-9), his son (vss. 10-13), and the man’s grandson (vss. 14-18).

The first example concerned a virtuous person who lived justly and righteously and was fully obedient to God’s law. The individual did not engage in idolatry or pagan practices of any kind. Moreover, he was faithful to the laws governing relationships with other Israelites. For example, he maintained sexual purity (see Exod. 20:14; Lev. 18:19).

Ezekiel described the righteous man as a person who refused to oppress anyone. For instance, he would not keep as collateral for a loan any item the borrower might require such as a cloak needed for warmth at night. He would never steal from anyone. Rather, he gave food and clothing to the poor.

This Israelite cared more about giving to others than receiving anything for himself (Ezek. 18:7). For example, in financial matters, if the upright person made a loan to anyone, his dealings were fair. He did not charge an excessive amount of interest on any loans he made. The phrase “take a profit” (vs. 8) refers to exploiting the poor to amass a fortune.

The devout Israelite tried to do what was right and fair in every situation by observing God’s statutes and regulations. This person’s outward actions revealed an inner moral character that was rooted in obedience to the covenant. In keeping with a life based on God’s grace, the righteous person would not suffer judgment for the sins committed by others.

6. *How does Ezekiel 18:5 describe righteousness?*

7. *What sins does Ezekiel 18:6 spotlight?*

8. *What would the righteous man not do according to Ezekiel 18:7-8?*

to them, but God said that their ways were unjust, not His (vss. 25, 29).

- Everyone should repent from sin, the Lord said, “and get a new heart and a new spirit” (vs. 31).

- Further, God said that He takes “no pleasure in the death of anyone” because they choose not to turn from their sins, but rather He wants all people to repent and turn to Him and “live” (vs. 32; see also vs. 23).

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 9

Verses 30 and 31 clarify that the Israelites faced the stark choice between life and death. If God’s people abandoned their rebellious acts, their lives

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Get a New Heart and a New Spirit

Ezekiel 18:30-32, KJV

30 Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.

31 Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

32 For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.

Ezekiel 18:30-32, NIV

³⁰“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. ³¹Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? ³²For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”

The Israelite response to God’s judgment was to accuse Him of being unjust. God, in response, declared that it was Israel’s ways that were unjust—not His (Ezek. 18:25). Indeed, verse 30 says that God judged the Israelites for their own sins, not the ones committed by previous generations. Also, only the Israelites who were obedient to God and repented of their sins could expect to escape His judgment ahead.

So, the only hope of avoiding calamity was for the people to repent of their sins so they would not be dragged down and ruined by them. The Lord questioned whether His people really wanted to be put to death for their sins. After all, He does not delight in condemning a person (vss. 23, 32).

So, He urged them to allow the Holy Spirit to bring about an inner renewal among them. Only the Spirit can give each person “a new heart and a new spirit” (vs. 31). Each person would be responsible for making the life or death decision to follow God’s ways and to live or die in unrepentant sin.

9. What incentive did the Israelites have to repent (Ezek. 18:30)?

would be preserved. In contrast, if they remained in their sins, they would perish.

BIBLE EXTRA

What God Requires

Micah 6:8 pointedly asks what the Lord requires from His people. He decreed that the covenant community make the following 3 principles a priority in their lives: (1) to promote justice (that is, honesty and fairness); (2) to let persistent acts of kindness undergird their dealings with one another; and, (3) to ensure that reverence, prudence, and obedience were the foundation of their relationship with the Lord (Isa. 29:19; Jer. 22:16; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:24; Jas. 1:27).

These requirements progress from what is external to what is internal and from one’s relationship to other people to one’s relationship with God. Specifically, to be just toward other people, one must display loyal and merciful love. Also, such compassion demands a circumspect walk before the Lord. These virtues are ones that believers today ought to strive to fulfill. God still expects His people to treat others with Christlike love and to live in devotion to Him.

WINDOW ON THE WORD

It’s Your Responsibility

We are responsible for our actions no matter what anyone else does. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962), wife of President Franklin Roosevelt, wisely said, “In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.” That echoes Ezekiel’s message from the Lord: “I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezek. 18:30).

3 Bible Application

Explore why taking responsibility for our actions is essential.

Photocopy this page and give the instructions to each group. Make copies of the handout from the Resource Kit and give those to the group discussing it.



Handout:

'Own What's Yours'

Read through the handout, complete the lists, then discuss as a group the final two questions. What have you learned about taking responsibility for your actions?

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Discussion Group

Read "Stand on Your Own Two Legs" in the student book, then discuss **Questions 10, 11, and 12**. Some people learn as children that they have to take responsibility for their actions. Others are always blaming others. We can make many excuses for our actions to other people, but God always knows what we do and why. He wants us to be people of integrity who don't blame others and are humble enough to admit we sin and need Him to redeem us.

Responsibility Lists

On a board or a sheet of newsprint, make one list of as many excuses as you can think of for not taking responsibility such as "My brother did it, not me" or "I'm the product of my environment." Then make a second list of admissions of responsibility such as "It's my fault," "I'm sorry," and "I deserve my punishment." Which list is more healing and helpful, and why?

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Stand on Your Own Two Legs

An episode of TV's classic *The Andy Griffith Show* features Andy's son Opie telling his father that somehow a baseball had gone through a lady's window, and asked would his father be upset if Opie said it was his fault? Andy said no, he would not be upset—provided Opie would not be upset if his father took a part of his son's allowance every week until the window was paid for.

At that same time, Andy had a young man in his jail awaiting trial who had recklessly driven a local man in his truck off the road. The young man asked the sheriff, "Why didn't you bail the kid out? It wasn't much money." Andy replied that he could have, but at some other time Opie would have wanted his father to bail him out in more serious situations. He would not learn to "stand on his own two legs" if he didn't take responsibility for his actions at his young age.

Later, an attorney arrived from the young man's father to get the young man out of paying for his mistake. At the short trial, the lawyer got the man driving the truck to accept blame for the accident instead. Andy was ready to dismiss the case when the young man admitted he had indeed driven the man off the road. He was responsible for the accident. When the lawyer asked the young man why he was taking the blame when he didn't have to, Andy replied, "I think he's saying he wants to stand on his own two legs."

Someone has said, "God sees our actions, not our excuses." The Israelites blamed everyone but themselves for their situation, so Ezekiel told them, God judges each of us individually for what we have done. We all need to stand on our own two legs and admit that we are not perfect, we do sinful things all the time, and we need a merciful God to forgive us.

- 10.** When did you learn to "stand on your own two legs"?
- 11.** Why would we think God believes our excuses?
- 12.** How do you become someone who always takes responsibility for their actions?

4 Life Response

Accept responsibility for your actions.

Adam and Eve did not own what they did. Neither did Cain when he killed Abel. That pattern of human denial keeps us from being the humble sinners we need to be and instead brings God's judgment on us, just as it did for the Israelites of Ezekiel's time.

Have your students read "Own It" in their student books and think about what they need to do this next week to move from excuses to responsibility. Sometimes that involves talking to

another person to make something right. Sometimes it means facing hard facts about ourselves we'd rather not admit—that we have made wrong choices, for example, and blamed those choices on others, or on our circumstances, or on anything but ourselves. Sometimes marriages break apart because of just a few words one spouse isn't willing to say to the other: "I'm sorry. It's my fault. Please forgive me."

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Own It

The lesson today might have brought something to mind you need to go and make right. Perhaps you need to tell someone you're sorry for something you did but had denied, or you need to take responsibility for something you have hedged about until now. What we own tells us a lot about our character, integrity, and humility before others and before God.

► *This week, commit to doing something to help replace "It's not my fault" with "I did it. I own it." Write here what you will do.*

KEY VERSE

Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

—Ezekiel 18:4, KJV

"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."

—Ezekiel 18:4, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of May 24 through May 30

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Matthew 12:38-42—Jonah's Experience Foreshadows Christ's.

Tues. Luke 11:29-32—Nineveh's Repentance: A Lasting Message.

Wed. Jonah 1:1-12—Jonah Turns Away from God's Call.

Thurs. Jonah 1:13-16—Sailors Make Vows to the Lord.

Fri. Jonah 4:1-5—Jonah Resents God's Grace toward Others.

Sat. Jonah 4:6-11—God's Compassion Overrides Jonah's Personal Comfort.

Sun. Jonah 3—God's Mercy Prevails.

Close the class in prayer. Thank God that He is a merciful, forgiving God who does not want anyone to perish but wants everyone to turn to Him and admit we are sinners in need of a Savior.



As the class members are leaving, hand out copies of this week's *Power for Living*. Take or mail copies of *Lesson Leaflet* to those who couldn't be with you today, or send them to those you would like to join your class.

Before Teaching Next Week's Lesson

Before next week, read Jonah 3. Ask students how they would define the word "compassion."