

BREAKING THE LEGACY

Scriptures: Ezekiel 18:1-18, 21-24, 30-32

As I did last week, I want to begin this sermon with a story. This is from Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing about Grace*.

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In 1898 Daisy was born into a working-class Chicago family, the eighth child of ten. ... Her father was a "mean drunk," she says. Daisy used to cower in the corner sobbing, as he kicked her baby brother and sister across the linoleum floor. ...

All her life Daisy determined to be unlike her father, and indeed she never touched a drop of alcohol. Yet she ruled her own family with a milder form of the tyranny she had grown up under. ... "Why did I ever have you stupid kids anyway?" she would yell. "You've ruined my life!" The Great Depression had hit, and each child was one more mouth to feed. She had six in all, rearing them in the two-bedroom row house she lives in to this day. In such close quarters, they seemed always underfoot. Some nights she gave them all whippings just to make a point: she knew they'd done wrong even if she hadn't caught them. ...

I have heard many such stories of ungrace from Margaret [her daughter], whom I knew well. All her life she determined to be different from her mother, Daisy. But Margaret's life had its own tragedies, some large and some small, and as her four children entered their teenage years she felt she was losing control of them. ...

Her son Michael, who turned sixteen in the 1960s, especially got under her skin. ... Margaret kicked him out of the house when she caught him smoking pot, and he moved into a hippie commune. She continued to threaten and scold him. ... The words she flung up against him fell back useless, until finally one day in a fit of anger she said, "I never want to see you again as long as I live." That was twenty-six years ago and she has not seen him since.

Michael is also my close friend. ... Michael emerged from the sixties mellower, his mind dulled by LSD. He moved to Hawaii, lived with a woman, left her, tried another, left her, and then got married. "Sue is the real thing," he told me when I visited him once. "This one will last."

It did not last. I remember a phone conversation with Michael, interrupted by the annoying technological feature known as "call waiting." The line clicked and Michael said, "Excuse me a second," then he left me holding a silent phone receiver for at least four minutes. He apologized when he came back on. His mood had darkened. "It was Sue," he said. "We're settling some of the last financial issues of the divorce." (Then) using almost the same tone I had heard from his mother, Margaret. "I hope I never see her again as long as I live!"(pp. 75-79).

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That is what you call a legacy—a heritage of alienation and bitterness passed down through three generations: Daisy to Margaret to Michael. It is the kind of thing the Bible describes repeatedly, what I call the ripple effect of sin. A classic example is King David. David has an affair with Bathsheba, and arranges to have her husband killed so he can marry her. Then in the next generation one of David's sons rapes his half sister, and in turn is killed by another of David's sons named Absalom. Then Absalom launches a rebellion against his father and drives him from the palace. David returns only when Absalom is killed. Two of David's sons meet a violent death. Later, in the time of David's grandsons, there is a civil war that divides the kingdom, and eventually in the time of Ezekiel, both halves are destroyed.

Sin is the gift that keeps on giving. It becomes a legacy passed down from generation to generation, giving rise to a proverb that Ezekiel himself quoted: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Call it original sin or whatever you want, but often the sins of the parents get passed down to the children.

At the Preview with the Preacher class on Wednesday night, people came up with many examples of this, like the statistics Joe Bruce gave us last week on children of incarcerated parents. Children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely than other children to be incarcerated themselves. The same dynamic happens in cases of divorce, child abuse, alcoholism, and many other things. The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.

But wait. God says no more. God says to Ezekiel, "As I live says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel." The legacy will be broken.

To illustrate God tells Ezekiel a story of three generations. The first generation is a righteous man: verses 5-9. He does not worship idols. He does not defile his neighbor's wife. He does not cheat, rob, or take advantage of others. Not only does he avoid doing bad things, he does good things. He gives food to the hungry and clothes to the naked. And if he must loan money to someone who needs help, he does not use their misfortune to make a profit. He is a good person who will have a good life, God declares. So far so good.

But being a good person does not guarantee that your children will be good people. Look at verses 10-13. The father has a violent son who acts just the opposite of his righteous father.

This is a good time to remind you of something I said in an earlier sermon from Ezekiel. When God called Ezekiel to be a prophet, he made him responsible to share God's word with people, but he did not make him responsible for whether they listened. The same applies to parents. Parents, you are responsible to share your faith with your children. You are responsible to care for them with love and respect and to model for them a life of right relationships with others and with God. But you are not responsible for how they turn out, because sometimes even good people have children who end up in trouble. I could you give 20 years of examples, and that is not counting Potlatch.

Does that mean the family is doomed? Will the sins of the second generation be passed on forever? No. The good news is in the third generation, verses 14-17:

But if this man has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise, who does not eat upon the mountains [meaning that he does not have ritual meals in honor of other gods at their mountaintop shrines] or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, does not wrong anyone, exacts no pledge [meaning that he does not loan to someone in need and demand collateral that he intends to keep], commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment ...

If he does all these things, God says, "he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live."

In other words, there is hope. Your heredity does not have to be your destiny. The sins of your parents do not have to be the legacy that you pass on to your own children. You do not have to be Daisy, Margaret, and Michael, passing on alienation and bitterness from generation to generation. God can give you a new future.

The next paragraph brings this hope even closer. Verses 21: "But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die." Not only can you break the legacy of your parents, you can break the legacy of your own past. Your heredity does not have to be your destiny, and your past does not have to be your future. You can break the cycle.

Ah, but what does it take? What will you need to break the legacy of your past? God supplies the answer at the end of verse 31: "Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit." Well that is helpful, isn't it? Just change your heart. Just change your attitude. Stop thinking bad thoughts. Stop feeling angry and hurt. If it were that easy we wouldn't need God, only Dr. Phil.

But that is just the point. Changing your heart, changing your feelings, changing your attitude is almost impossible without the intervention of God. And that is why we have been saying the same words of forgiveness for the last two months from Ezekiel 11. Take at your bulletin and look again as I read the words of forgiveness. God says,

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

It is not within your own power to break the legacy of your past. That's why Dr. Phil will not solve your problems. It will take an intervention of God to break the legacy of your past, either your past generations or your past life. It will take an intervention of God to give you a new heart and a new spirit, to break the stranglehold of alienation and bitterness that is passed on from generation to generation. But that is exactly what Jesus came to do. Jesus came to break the legacy, to transform us from the inside out, if we give him the chance.

- Ken Onstot
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