

## Punished For “The Sins of the Fathers” – Really!?

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A few years ago I stood with a friend on the sidewalk of a small village in Northern Ireland. As we stood there chatting a young man walked by whose life was evidently deteriorating in sin. He was quite a bit younger than my friend and me and we both were aware of the unhappy circumstances of his childhood. It was one of those moments where you don't need words to communicate your thoughts; we shared a common sympathy and made the obvious link between his present condition and the legacy of his parents. Quietly and soberly, and without further explanation—for it was not necessary—my friend simply said; “the sins of the fathers.” The application of those words was blatantly obvious—the son was continuing in the sins of his father. To put it another way, the sins of the father were being relived in his son.

I have often thought of these words in the intervening years. Have they a deeper meaning? Does Exodus 20:5 (“...visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me...”) teach that God punishes children for the sins of their predecessors? Was this young man's life a punishment for his dad's sin? If he is not being punished, what is the connection between his present circumstances and the life of his father? In a more general context; how do I relate this verse to the patterns I see in my own extended family—the undesirable family traits that we live with. Am I drowning in my own gene pool and doomed to relive the folly of previous generations, and my kids the folly of my generation?

The second commandment might seem a strange place to find the answer to these questions. In that commandment the Lord forbids idolatry—the use of idols, images and icons in worship. Attached to this commandment, however, there is both a warning and a promise. There is the threat of punishment (the “visitation” of God) for idolatry and the promise of mercy for those who love the Lord. We learn from this warning and the promise following, **first**, that guilt is transferred within a unit of mutual responsibility – you sin together, you are guilty together. **Second**, there are serious and lasting consequences to sin, (especially the sin of idolatry). Family legacy is a very powerful force and sin transferred to succeeding generations is often a burden too heavy to bear. **Third**, God punishes sin only in those children who persist in and condone the sins of their father's. **Fourth**, the mercy promised shows that the gospel has the power to break the chains of a corrupt inheritance – where sin abounds grace did much more abound (Romans 5:20).

**Consider the context of the warning.** The words under consideration (Exodus 20:5 see also 34:7; Deuteronomy 5:9; Numbers 14:18) are found in the context of a national covenant. The principle that is being establishing is “covenant solidarity” –God holds families responsible for their conduct as families” (Ryken, 571). God held Israel responsible for national sin; Moses understood this when he prayed in Numbers 14:15; “*Now if thou shalt kill all this people as one man.*” In a modern context this would apply to those who join or align themselves with a corrupt organization—they bear the sin associated with that organization.

The national guilt that Israel incurred was because of the covenant relationship that God had with the nation. The sin of idolatry, more than any other sin, threatened the fabric of Israel's theocratic government. Thus, for the sin of idolatry, God dealt with the nation in the Babylonian

Captivity. The Israelites understood that God was dealing with them not only individually but also nationally. Observe Daniel, for example, who was living in personal blessing while nationally under the chastising rod of that same God. When Daniel prayed, therefore, he did not only confess his own sins, but the sins of the nation (Daniel 9:20 *cf.* Psalm 79:8).

It is important also to notice that Exodus 20:5 is in the context of idolatry. This is a particularly insidious sin which casts a long shadow—“It has vast baneful effects in the family and in society at large” (Cairns, 167). There is a solemn warning here for parents—family sins have consequences (Ezekiel 18:2 “...*The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?*”). In light of this solemn observation we should learn as parents, as we plan the future, to “be more concerned about the second commandment than [we] are about [our] financial portfolio” (Ryken, 571).

**Consider also the conclusion of the warning;** “...*of them that hate me...*” The visitation (i.e. punishment) that is brought on the children for the sins of the fathers always correlates with the children’s own personal guilt. There is a connection between the sin of the father and the sin of the children and it is this; that the children continue in the sin of the father. The Lord points out here that the children are “haters” of God as well as their fathers and are not innocent victims for their father’s sin. God punishes sin in those children who persist in and condone the sins of their father’s.

**Consider, finally, the gospel promise also attached to the second commandment.** Perhaps you come from a family that has not honored God and one in which the curse of sin seems evident and the patterns of sin persist. The words of the second Commandment do not end without hope. No one should feel trapped by inherited sin. The promise of mercy is more powerful than the threat of judgment. The gospel always triumphs over the curse and the gospel can break us free from the hereditary chains of sin. Paul says in Romans 5:20 “where sin abounds, grace did much more abound.”

Note also Paul’s encouraging words in 1 Corinthians 7:14 with regard to the unbelieving husband or wife. Rather than the believer being cursed by the unbeliever in the relationship, the unbeliever is benefited and blessed for his/her association with the believing partner. The children are also benefited more by the believing parent than the unbelieving parent—“where sin abounded, grace did much more abound”!

**Note:**

Exodus 20:5

*“...visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me...”*

does not contradict Deuteronomy 24:16.

*“The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.”*

These two verses are in two distinctly different contexts. Exodus is in the context of covenant solidarity whereas the stipulation of Deuteronomy 24:16 is in a legal context as it is in contrast to the practice of vicarious punishment in the surrounding pagan nations.