

The Discipleship Project-Summer 2021

Series 1: Who's to Blame

A Study by Eugene Wilson

Blaming the Church

Series Big Idea

Because Jesus Christ took our blame through His death on the cross, we must assume responsibility for our own choices and trust in His grace and mercy.

Lesson Big Idea

Because Jesus Christ took our blame, we must assume responsibility for our own choices and refuse to blame the church for our disappointments.

FOUNDATION

Scripture Focus: Deuteronomy 4:21–22 (PPT)

The origins of the war were centered around a border dispute between Great Britain and the United States. But there is more to the story. Robert Petterson writes,

The war is unknown to most Americans, and yet history hung on its outcome . . . For years, the Hudson Bay Company had operated a large farm on San Juan Island. When American settlers came, they were despised as illegal squatters. Tempers were already frayed when a pig wandered off the Hudson Bay farm and began rooting out potatoes in Lyman Cutlar's field. When the American farmer shot and killed the pig, the British exploded. Charles Griffin stormed over to the American demanding satisfaction. "But your pig was eating my potatoes," protested Cutlar. "Rubbish!" snorted Griffin. "It's up to you to keep your potatoes out of my pig." Though Cutlar offered to pay ten dollars as restitution for the pig, Griffin reported him to the British authorities, who threatened to arrest him. His American neighbors fired off a petition for US protection to General William S. Harney, the commander of the Department of Oregon. The virulently anti-British general sent a squadron of the Ninth Infantry, headed by future Confederate general George Pickett. When word reached Victoria, the governor of British Columbia sent three British warships to San Juan Island. By the time news of the escalation reached Washington, DC, and London, officials in both countries were shocked that the killing of a pig had caused a troop buildup of three warships, eighty-six artillery guns, and two thousand six hundred soldiers squared off against each other. A single spark might have ignited a third great war between the Americans and British since 1776. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. The kaiser of Germany was asked to mediate. When he decided in favor of the Americans a year later, troops from both sides left—and the San Juan Islands now belonged to the US (The One Year Book of Amazing Stories).

"Thankfully," Petterson concludes, "the only casualty of the Pig War was the pig."

FRAME

Amazingly, something as small as the killing of a pig almost led to a war between nations. Yet people routinely base decisions with detrimental consequences on things that are not nearly as important as

what they are about to lose. Such is the decision people make to allow the mistakes and failures of those in the church to lead them away from church, to allow bitterness to spring up, or to make excuses for their own bad behavior. Some people blame the church for the fact that their children are no longer living for the Lord. Some blame the moral failure of a church leader as the reason they no longer trust leadership, and so on.

While every one of us has a story, we must recognize it is impossible for us to move forward, to be all God wants us to be and to seize our destiny, when we hang on to what happened X number of years ago. **We lose our ability to take a positive step into our future when we refuse to let go of yesterday. (PPT)** We cannot blame the church and at the same time be the church we are supposed to be.

- **What is it that makes blaming other Christians, or the church, so appealing?**

Consider Moses. Moses was arguably one of the greatest leader's humanity has ever known. His life's story is an amazing testament to the fact that God's hand was upon his life from the very beginning. Moses was an Israelite who grew up in Pharaoh's household. One would have thought he was perfectly positioned to lead God's people out of bondage. However, at the age of forty, Moses fled to the desert. His life had become threatened due to him killing an Egyptian, a man who had acted in cruelty toward an Israelite. Surprisingly, the initial push back against Moses and what he had done came from his own people. (See Exodus 2:13–14.) **Perhaps this encounter was the root of Moses' participation in the blame game (PPT)**—passing the buck to someone else rather than accepting personal responsibility.

Think about it. Experiencing a sense of rejection from his own people must have pained Moses. Moses was the one who stuck his neck out to help his people. He was the one who took the gamble in stepping up and stopping the Egyptian. But instead of being thanked for his actions, Moses was accused, rejected, and misunderstood. His motives were questioned. Many, no doubt, experiencing similar circumstances—which resulted in Moses living as a fugitive for forty years in a desert—would blame the Israelites who had spoken out against him. If only they had not spoken concerning what had happened, perhaps Pharaoh would have never known what had occurred.

Fast-forward to the ending portion of Moses' leadership—after Moses had returned to lead the children of Israel out of bondage, after the plagues, after the crossing of the Red Sea, and after nearly forty years of leadership in the journey between Egypt and Canaan's land. We pick up the story right before Israel's entry into the Promised Land.

Moses had disobeyed God. Instead of speaking to the rock, he struck it. He struck the rock two times with his staff, and water flowed out of it. Although the Israelites were happy with what Moses had done, God was not pleased. Moses made it look as if he and Aaron were responsible for bringing forth the water when it was a miracle of God.

In response, God told Moses he would see the Promised Land, but he would not enter it. Moses' response is somewhat surprising. He said,

Furthermore the LORD was angry with me for your sakes, and swore that I should not go over Jordan, and that I should not go in unto that good land, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance: but I must die in this land, I must not go over Jordan: but ye shall go over, and possess that good land. (Deuteronomy 4:21–22, KJV)

Moses placed the blame on the people as the reason he was not allowed to enter into the Promised Land. (PPT) And this was not the first time Moses directly blamed the people.

In Deuteronomy 3:23–26, after recounting the great defeats of kings outside the land, Moses pointed his finger at the Israelites for his own sin. Moses said,

Then I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying: "O Lord GOD, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your mighty hand, for what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do anything like Your works and Your mighty deeds? I pray, let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, those pleasant mountains, and Lebanon." But the LORD was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me. So the LORD said to me: "Enough of that! Speak no more to Me of this matter." (NKJV)

This incident, however, still was not the first time Moses had blamed the people. The first time Moses mentioned his exclusion from seeing the Promised Land is found in Deuteronomy 1:37. Long before Moses sinned, the spies had been sent to spy out the land. Moses, years later, wrote concerning those times. After telling of how God's people had sinned in listening to the voice of the spies—who had insisted the land was too difficult to take, thereby contradicting the promise of God—Moses stated, "The LORD was also angry with me for your sakes, saying, 'Even you shall not go in there'" (NKJV).

Notice, **Moses associated his own rejection with God's anger toward the Israelite rebellion and unfaithfulness in not taking the land, (PPT)** even though it had nothing to do with his action's years later.

- **What are some things we should consider doing so we do not do what Moses did?**

Seek to dig deep and go beyond the *feeling* layer. (PPT) We should identify our feelings—feelings of helplessness, anger, resentment, hurt, or the feeling that leads us to withdraw. Then we should ask ourselves, "What am I thinking?" Our thoughts have a major impact on our feelings. Changing our feelings is difficult. If we are hurt, we are hurt. We can, however, change our thinking. Changing our thinking is often the first step in changing our feelings.

Another thing we can do—and there is certainly nothing wrong with this—is to **call something as it is. (PPT)** If someone has done something he or she should not have done, acknowledge it. Simply say, "That person should not have done that; it wasn't right."

- **What does it mean to "call something as it is"? How does that help us to move forward?**

After stating the obvious, we move to the next step, which is to ask, "**What can I do about it?**" (PPT) Since it is impossible to change someone else, what are some things we can do? Here are a few things: (1) Learn from others' mistakes, so we do not repeat them. (2) Establish healthy boundaries. (3) Trust God's sovereignty. If God sets up kings and takes kings down—and He does—we can trust Him, knowing all things work together for good. (4) Work on ourselves—that is, our wrongful reactions to those who hurt us.

The point is: instead of blaming others—which renders us helpless—we must do something constructive.

- **What might "establish healthy boundaries" look like in dealing with those who hurt you? How might doing so move you beyond blaming others?**

The fact is: there is no perfect church because there are no perfect people. Other people do not always do right any more than we always do right. So, instead of blaming others, and **instead of blaming the church, we should accept responsibility for our own actions and extend grace to everyone else. (PPT)** At the end of the day, we are going to need grace extended to us too. Not one of us is perfect. We all have made mistakes. We all have failed.

We are not alone in our failures. The Bible abounds with failures of people. Abraham lied about his wife. Isaac lied about his wife. Jacob deceived his father. Rahab was a prostitute. Gideon was full of fear. Barak lacked courage. Samson got involved with Delilah. Yet despite their failures, they are highlighted in Hebrews 11 as having faith. The lesson is simple: God is not limited by our mistakes. He does not overlook them, but neither does He focus on them. God looks at who we can become, not at who we are. Our imperfections do not cause Him to shun us. He does not love us because we are good; He loves us in our sin, and because of love He comes to make us good.

While our God extends grace to us, who so desperately need it, why will we not extend grace to others? Do we think we can earn His grace or that we deserve His grace? If so, we are grossly mistaken. We cannot earn His grace, and we certainly do not deserve it. Likewise, we cannot expect everyone around us to be perfect. We must deal with mistakes honestly. And dealing with mistakes honestly does not consist of us blaming others.

- **How might belief and trust in the sovereignty of God keep you from blaming others?**

We can be accusers, but if we are, we are acting like Satan who is an accuser. Or we can help those who make mistakes to connect with God. We can participate in the ministry of reconciliation, which is the ministry we are called to fulfill. **We are not called to the ministry of blaming others, accusing others, or condemning others. (PPT)** We are called to help people get over their mistakes and become overcomers.

Our messed-up world needs to hear a message of hope. They need to know that despite their failures, they can get up. A biblical perspective is that failures are never fatal. It is not that God overlooks our failures. In fact, our failures have huge consequences. For example, Samson lost his eyes and ended up in chains. But he still ended up in the chapter of faith. Likewise, despite our failures, we can get back up. A mistake does not have to be the end.

We must be careful with the blame game. The blame game says: you are unacceptable because you failed. That statement implies the one placing the blame does not fail. The reality is everyone at some point fails.

Interestingly, the fall of humanity gave way to a culture of blame. Making excuses and shifting responsibility became the norm. Yet when God created humanity, He gave humans dominion, which means humans had the power to prevail or “reign over.” God’s plan was for humans to have the power—the freedom and creativity—to extend God’s rule. Do not miss the contrast here. We were given dominion, but we settled for blaming others. In other words, we gave up our ability or power and embraced powerlessness. That is what happens when we blame others. That is what happens when we blame the church. **When we blame the church, we lose our God-given ability to do something about the problem. (PPT)**

The fact is: everyone has fallen and needs a God who extends grace.

Note the various reactions of people in the Bible who failed. Adam sought to cover up. Elijah got depressed. Peter wept. Judas hanged himself. Yet God clothed Adam. He fed Elijah. Jesus restored Peter, and He called Judas a friend.

What do you do when people in the church mess up? Do you get angry? Do you blame them? Do you withdraw yourself? Do you say, “I’m just going to give up”? Do you use the mistakes of others as an excuse for your own bad behavior?

Or do you allow God to work through you to extend grace to those in need, understanding that someday you might need the same grace extended to you?

- **In what way(s) does grace impact our relationships with others? What might we do to enhance our extending grace to others?**

FINISH

In *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*, an organizational leadership book, the authors tell the following story:

In May 1996, noted author Jon Krakauer tried climbing Mt. Everest with a group of paying climbers. As they encountered obstacles such as blizzards, 62 mph winds, and high-altitude sickness, the group began to fall apart. Some of the more headstrong climbers decided to try for the summit themselves and struck out on their own. Team discipline was abandoned. They all had the same goal, but the loss of discipline and sense of accountability for each other in an extremely unforgiving environment turned out to be lethal. The result: eight people died.

Five years later, another group set out to climb Mt. Everest; their goal was to help a blind climber, Erik Weihenmayer, reach the summit. The team carefully planned the route, just as Krakauer's group had done. A big difference, however, was that at the end of each day Weihenmayer's group huddled together in what they called the "tent meeting" to talk over what they had accomplished and what they had learned, which would help them to plan and make adjustments for the next day. Faster climbers on the team "cleared the path," fixed ropes, and then worked their way back to meet Erik along the trail. Erik said, "Our team stuck together and took care of each other, which gave me just enough courage to finish." At one critical point, it took thirteen hours for their blind leader to cross the aluminum extension ladders that spanned the bottomless crevasses of the extremely dangerous Khumbu Icefall. The team knew that on summit day they would have to get across in two hours. In nightly tent meetings, they shared lessons learned and committed to the next day's strategy. It took days and days of practice and night after night of tent meetings. The result? On summit day, they actually passed sighted teams as they worked to get the entire team to the other side of the icefall in record time.

On May 25, 2001, Erik Weihenmayer became the first blind person to stand on the summit of Mt. Everest. His team's other remarkable first: The greatest number of people from one team to reach the top of Everest in a single day, eighteen in all. In the end, Erik and almost everyone on his team reached the highest peak on the planet and returned safely.

Amazing things can happen when we refrain from blaming others and instead support one another. Rather than blaming others, let's extend grace. Let's be a church that loves people, helps people, and supports people. In doing so, the church will become more like the church it should be.