

Sunday, September 28, 2014: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Matthew 21:23-32

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue

Ezekiel steps right into the middle of a group of people busy at that most ancient of activities, going all the way back to Eden: the blame game.

Ezekiel voices God's critical word. "It's not our fault," the people respond. "The problems we face are because of our parents' misdeeds." They quote a proverb to Ezekiel: "The parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Jesus too has constant run-ins with those who would be blameless. In this week's Gospel reading, his run-in is with the chief priests and elders. They say to him, "By what authority have you ridden into Jerusalem as some kind of Messiah, charged into the temple, and chased out the merchants selling animals for the sacrifices? By what authority do you teach the people, and who gave you that authority?"

The question is a trap: Jesus can either walk into a blasphemy charge or lose credibility with the people. Instead, he asserts authority over his interrogators by answering their question with a question of his own—one that poses its own trap: "By what authority did John baptize?" Say it's by human authority, and they're in trouble with the people; say it's by God's authority, and everyone will want to know why they did not get baptized, too. So the chief priests and elders say, "We don't know." That's a safe choice. Sometimes, "I don't know" is the most honest answer.

But they aren't being honest. These religious leaders did not submit to John's baptism because it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and in their view they had nothing to repent. They bore no blame, at least none for which they would seek John's baptism or Jesus' mediation.

We are no different. We live increasingly in a victims' culture. People seek to dodge personal responsibility for their misdeeds. A friend relates a story about her grandson Logan, a toddler. His mother came upon him in the bathroom with the family dog. Logan was standing with his back to his mother, swatting at the toilet paper roll over and over again, sending streams of bathroom tissue to the floor. His mother said, "Logan." He turned toward her and without pause pointed his finger at the innocent bystander and said, "Dog."

We laugh at Logan. However, the stakes are high in the blame game. We play it because we fear the consequences of being wrong. We may be punished by our parents, have to pay the fine for a speeding ticket, or be humiliated by an unforgiving electorate. According to Ezekiel, the highest stake of all is facing God's judgment.

I think we play the blame game because we hear the echo of God's judgment in accusations made against us. We don't measure up. We are not the people God created us to be. God's judgment is deadly for us. This is why critical words have such power over us, why we cannot stand being wrong and have to shift the blame elsewhere. At some deep level, we know our lives are at stake.

The blame game is about being in the right, being righteous. But it's a game no one wins. The truth I know about myself is that only death will put an end to my sinfulness. I can try all I want to shift the blame, but I cannot do anything about death. For a problem this big, we shall have to look to God. Who is going to get me past this except God? God is standing there in the very trap posed by these questions. Jesus stands neck-deep in John's baptism.

The trap's spring is the question by which Jesus begins his parable. "What do you think?" he asks. Be careful. Be cautious before you point the finger too quickly at someone else. The one who submits to John's baptism is the obedient son in Jesus' parable. Standing with the chief priests and elders, Jesus is the only one who qualifies. John's baptism was a watery vineyard, to be sure, but one from which good fruit grows, the fruit that is the son of Mary's womb.

Jesus submits to John's baptism in order to line up with all those who accept their blame and acknowledge their need of God's grace. And there he is, God's grace in the flesh.

We play the blame game because we are filled with guilt and are eager to be rid of it. "Pass it to me," Jesus says. "Play the blame game with me and only me. I'll take all you've got." And he carries all our blame to his grave. Rising to new life, he absolves us; he pronounces us free. This is the rhythm of the baptized life.

The tax collectors and prostitutes get it, says Jesus. They know they don't have a leg to stand on before God. They see the foolishness of trying to blame someone else for their lives. Who would believe that? They end up with lives transformed and turned around, entering the kingdom with the obedient son, the way to new life.