

Blame or Sigh?

Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-12

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One summer day on our way to nowhere my twelve-year-old sister and I found a pack cigarettes, not a crumbled, broken up pack of, but 20 of RJ Reynolds's finest—Winstons—"the cigarette that tasted good, like a cigarette should," sponsor of Walter Cronkite's CBS Evening News and the Garry Moore variety show. Bowman Gray Jr., a future president of RJ Reynolds, introduced the Winston brand in 1954. Americans lit up by the millions. By 1966 Winston was the number one selling cigarette in the nation and the Bowman Grays were wealthy people. In fact, Bowman Gray's father was so rich that he bought a Baptist school of medicine in Wake Forest, North Carolina and moved it to where else but Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Little did my sister and I know that the red and white package of burley tobacco would fund one of the finest cancer centers in America! That summer day in 1961 we were just two kids curiously happy to have stumbled upon the brand smoked not only by Fred and Wilma Flintstone but also our father.

Of course, even at twelve and nine, my sister and I knew cigarette smoking was bad—at least for kids. Smoking was a sophisticated adult activity or alternately what serious hoodlums did behind the high school gym. Naturally we wanted to be like both—smart and dangerous—so we snatched the pack and stole away to the basement of the house next door, which, still under construction, smelled of red clay and freshly poured concrete.

Though I was younger by four years my sister handed me the matches we had stolen from home: "Here, you do it," she said. We smoked till our eyes watered and throats burnt, which is the typical reaction of human flesh to burning tobacco, but no matter we were *smart and dangerous*.

After burning several Winstons and now seriously *smart and dangerous*, we slinked home bleary eyed where upon arriving our mother not only inquired of our whereabouts but also the scent following us.

"Mama, she made me do it," I pleaded.

"He found them," my sister countered. "It was his idea."

"Don't be mad, Mama. And don't tell Daddy. It was her fault. She gave me the matches."

When kids get caught smoking somebody's at fault. Somebody's going to pay. Somebody is to blame. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?"

Speaking of childhood sins, some of you remember when report cards were marked with checks and x's. When I brought my report card home, that's the first place my father looked. He called it *deportment*, though *conduct* was clearly marked on the manila folder I took home every eight weeks. Not my father; he insisted on calling it *deportment*—the dreaded checks and x's—"Uses time well; Works well with others; Follows directions." I never cared for *deportment* or the review by my father; but checks

and x's did teach responsibility. And responsibility is a good thing. Teachers wielded terrible power—the power of the check, the power of the x: “Rabbi, who sinned”

Blame is a powerful tool. It teaches personal responsibility and social cooperation. Both are important. Where would we be without cooperation? Where would we be without personal responsibility? We make it a point of law that diminished or compromised agency mitigates culpability. For good reason, we limit the agency of children. There are good reasons why nine-year-olds aren't licensed to drive; twelve-year olds can't marry. In the state of Alabama, you must be nineteen to purchase RJ Reynolds products and twenty-one to buy beer. There are checks and x's in life: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?”

Like us, the disciples inhabited a moral universe of cause and effect; blame was assigned. And blindness was a clear sign. When someone was born blind, somebody had to have done something wrong. People aren't born blind without good reason. Someone must be at fault. “You tell us, Jesus. Did he do something wrong or his parents?”

We're not as far removed from that moral universe as we sometimes think. “So and so has lung cancer; must have been a smoker. She has liver disease; drank, didn't she? He has high blood pressure; you know he's overweight, never exercises. They're divorcing; bet somebody cheated; unemployed, must be lazy; depressed, must be weak-kneed.”

Behavior has consequences. What are the chances of a fifteen-year-old single parent making it in today's economy; what about a high school dropout; what about abused or neglected children? What happens when families spend more than they have or when they confuse wants with needs? What happens when a business compromises worker safety or public health? What happens when tax laws privilege some over others? Moral behavior is not benign. We know that. Moral choices create consequences. “So, teacher, [tell us] who sinned, this man or his parents?” The teacher answered: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.”

“No one sinned,” Jesus said. “No one is to blame. This man was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed.”

What was Jesus up to? It's not like Jesus doesn't believe in sin. Jesus has plenty to say about sin. He says he came into the world “for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Sighted people who heard Jesus say this were prompted to ask him, “Surely we are not blind are we?” Jesus answered, “Now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Jesus had little patience with those who considered themselves moral police. He was far more interested in helping the moral police see their own sin. And when we see our sin it's not so much a matter of accepting blame as it is seeing light. Jesus is far more concerned with forgiveness than assigning blame, which is why, rather than answering the moral police, Jesus heals the man born blind. Jesus brings light rather than assigning blame.

The blind man is not a poster child for Sunday school. When neighbors no longer recognize the man, the blind man is at a loss to tell them who restored his sight. He doesn't know where Jesus is. The moral police, the Pharisees, are also curious. They

want to know how the blind man received his sight. The blind man can't say, "He put this mud on my eyes, I washed and now I see."

"That's impossible!"

"I know, I know; but I was blind, now I see."

"Who is this Jesus?"

"He's a prophet."

That's as much as the blind man knows. He hasn't been to Sunday school, no catechism, no theology, just blindness, just shame, a very dark world. And now he sees.

The moral police drag the now sighted man to his parents. The parents confirm his story, "Yes, yes, this is our boy. He was blind. He's of age. Let him speak for himself." Again, the moral police demand to know about Jesus, but the blind man is not much help: "I was blind, now I see. Do you also want to become his disciples?"

Sin involves blame in as much as sin involves responsibility, but sin can't be fixed by simply accepting or assigning blame. The greater question is the Light. The bigger question is not who's right and who's wrong, but where can we find help? Of course, we often resist help; we prefer assigning blame. We resist light. We sometimes prefer darkness. We'd rather blame than forgive. Blame is a powerful weapon. Blame is a powerful tool. Blame keeps everyone in the dark. Offenders remain offenders, while the offended remain offended. In a world of checks and x's, blame is a perfectly fair question. In the world of Jesus, it's the wrong question. In Jesus' world, the right question is not whom should we blame, but where can we find light? When things go badly, as they inevitably do, blame may temporarily make us feel better, but blame does not heal; blame can't make us whole. Healing comes when, letting go of blame, we step into the light.

Some years ago, following a Sunday sermon, I received an email. This is a portion of what the writer said:

I believe when a person can forgive themselves it is only then that one can truly forgive another person. To forgive myself, I had to take full responsibility for my actions. No more victim thinking. No more blaming others. Bad things happened. Bad things will happen. People make mistakes, clearly I make mistakes. Recognize, accept, forgive, move on. And most of all, try not to expect other people to have the same philosophy. . . . For me, finally having the courage and the vision to see the truth about my accountability and the fallibility of others—that no one is here to save me, but that I am ultimately saved and carried by something all-powerful and greater than us all, and I don't have to define it—it's like falling off a cliff. Every day. The need to assign blame, or to issue praise, to label, to solve, to reduce to finite human knowing all things around us—that need stifles forgiveness and clarity and honesty and acceptance and humility. . . I'm rambling," the writer concluded.

And yes, she was rambling a bit, but then seeing the light does that—it leaves blame behind and permits us to ramble in wonder, love and light—we were blind, now we see. That's what meeting the Teacher does—it leaves blame behind and gives us sight. Amen.