

The Sins of the Fathers

Exodus 20:4-6

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In John MacArthur's last sermon before he left for the summer, he commented in passing on a verse from the Old Testament, where God says He "**will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.**" That is how Exodus 34:7 says it. You find the same statement with slight variations in wording in Numbers 14:18 and Deuteronomy 5:9. And the same threat is given in other places in the Old Testament, such as Leviticus 26:39: "**Because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away like them.**"

I thought it would be helpful to go back and take a closer look at that threat and consider what it is saying. There are, of course, other texts that almost seem to contradict this idea that children are punished for the sins of their fathers. Ezekiel 18:20, for example: "**The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son.**" And Leviticus 26:39 (the verse that says, "**because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away like them**") is immediately followed with this: "**But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers . . . then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my**

covenant with Abraham." So you have to interpret this threat in light of the promises that go with it. Only those who *persist* in their fathers' sins will suffer for those sins.

This idea is actually introduced in connection with the Second Commandment, and that's where we're going to go this morning. The text is Exodus 20:5-6. While you are turning there, let me read it in full. I'm going to read, starting in verse 4, which gives the Second Commandment, and then this morning we'll look *beyond* the actual commandment and focus on verses 5 and 6, which are a special admonition attached by God Himself to the Second Commandment. Here is the passage, starting with verse 4:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them [That's the substance of the Second Commandment. Now here's the passage we'll be looking at this morning.] for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Notice that the Second Commandment itself is utterly comprehensive. It tells us we are not to make or worship images "**of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth**

beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." That doesn't leave any other options. Earthly images, heavenly images, and images of sea creatures are all forbidden. That rules out religious idols of *any* kind.

We know from Scripture, of course, that worshiping carved images is wrong, and if I asked you to give a biblical reason why it's wrong to worship God in the form of an image, you *might* say it is because "**God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.**" And that would be a good answer. In fact, that's exactly what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman in John 4:24. "**God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.**" So that's true. That is a sound and biblical reason not to make an image of God, or to bow down to an image of any kind. God is a spirit, and true worship is spiritual, and worship ought never attach itself to any physical object, even an image that is supposed to represent something heavenly.

But in our passage for this morning (vv. 5-6) the Lord goes on to give *a even more powerful and immediate reason* for abstaining from the worship of images.

Verse 5: "**for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.**" God doesn't tolerate any worship of any objects of any kind that are not God. And the Lord himself goes on to outline the *consequences* of this sin, warning that the effects of idolatry

will be felt by our children, and our children's children, to the third and fourth generation.

Now this is a hard passage at first glance. We hear it quoted frequently, and it is a mystifying statement for many people. What does it mean to say that God is *jealous*? And what does God mean when He says he visits the sins of the fathers on the children? I think if we examine the passage carefully, we will discover it is teaching some very clear and simple lessons.

So this morning I want to go systematically through verses 5 and 6. And as we do that, we will highlight three main lessons from this passage. The first is—

1. A LESSON ABOUT GOD'S JEALOUSY

According to this passage, God is jealous. Again, this is the first and main reason God Himself gives for forbidding us to worship manmade images: "*Don't make graven images, because God is jealous.*"

God is *jealous*. I remember hearing that statement occasionally as a child, and I used to think it didn't sound very nice.

God is *jealous*? Absolutely. This is a truth you will find taught consistently throughout Scripture. God is jealous with a holy jealousy. And this is one of the most fearsome attributes of God.

What is this jealousy that Scripture atTRIButes to God?

As a child I grew up thinking of jealousy as an ugly and selfish attitude. I was the middle child in a family of three children, and I was always a jealous of my older brother, because as the eldest child in our family, he enjoyed the normal privileges that come with being the firstborn. And I was also a little jealous of my younger sister, because *she* got all the privileges associated with being the baby of the family. I was in between, neither the eldest nor the youngest, with none of the privileges associated with either. So it was easy to be jealous.

But somewhere along the line, I realized that my older brother was jealous of me and my sister, because we were free from most of the *responsibilities* that come with being the eldest child, and my sister was jealous of my brother and me, because we didn't face any of the *disadvantages* that come with being the youngest child. And I finally began to understand that jealousy depends on your point of view, and no matter what point of view our fallen hearts take, it is easy to find reasons to be sinfully jealous. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, and no matter which side of the fence you're on, you can find a reason to envy those on the other side. And that kind of jealousy obviously isn't a good thing. Is a bad attitude that carries its own kind of bondage. It makes contentment impossible. It ruins every blessing of life.

At least that's what my mother tried to teach us all. And you know what? *She was right.* Childish jealousy is an egocentric and hateful passion. Most human jealousy stems from the fear of being supplanted; it is a negative passion that is based on selfishness. Jealousy is the incubator where envy, resentment, suspicion, insecurity and a host of other negative passions are hatched. That brand of jealousy is a self-centered, unbecoming, hateful, and destructive emotion.

That is why we don't usually associate jealousy with that which is godly. In fact, if Scripture itself did not describe God as "jealous," we might think it blasphemy to associate God with this kind of human passion.

But Scripture *says* God is a jealous God, so it is very clear that there *is* such a thing as godly jealousy. Not all jealousy is sinful jealousy. That is true even in the human realm.

Righteous husbands jealously protect the affections of their wives, and godly wives jealously guard against anything that would steal away their husbands' affections. The apostle Paul affirms that there is such a thing as godly jealousy in 2 Corinthians 11:2, when he writes, "**For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.**" He was jealous of their purity. He resented anything that threatened that purity. He hated anything that undermined their virtue, because he knew they were espoused to Christ—so whatever sabotaged their chastity

brought dishonor to Christ. And Paul described that kind of jealousy as a holy, godly jealousy.

God's jealousy is of that type. It is a holy vigilance against anything that would alienate our affections from Him or compromise the purity of our love for Him. God's jealousy is actually rooted in His love for us. Because God loves us, He must hate everything that would diminish *our* love for Him, because according to 1 Corinthians 13:6, genuine love "**does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.**" His jealousy is therefore an expression of His love.

But I hope you understand that God's jealousy is not like the human emotion we call jealousy. God doesn't have fits of jealousy. His jealousy is not a passion that rises and falls in response to some stimulus He doesn't control. Instead, God's jealousy is a fixed and immutable disposition against everything that would undermine or diminish His creatures' love for Him. God's jealousy is nothing like the uncontrollable passions we experience; His jealousy is a deliberate and unchanging contempt for everything that challenges His rightful place as sovereign God.

By the way, jealousy is one of the ways God's *anger* is expressed. I hope you also understand that God's anger against sin is not a fluctuating emotion, either; it is a fixed and steady disposition. Don't ever think of God's anger or His jealousy (or any of the divine affections) as anything like human passions.

God's jealousy is not blind rage. It is a steadfast and constant loathing of everything that would pretend to rival Him. It is as unchanging and immutable as God's eternal love for us.

Again, it is one of the expressions of His love. God's love for righteousness would mean nothing apart from His holy hatred of all that is evil.

According to this passage, God is jealous (with a godly jealousy) against all forms of idol-worship—even the kind of idol-worship that is sometimes offered in the name of Jehovah.

Now, consider what this means. Obviously, if you make an idol that represents another god, you have sinned, because you have violated the *First* Commandment by having another God besides the true God. But I want to stress this: This Second Commandment also rules out even the kind of images that are supposed to represent the true God. He is not to be portrayed by an image of any kind. And to make an image that represents Him—or to think you can worship Him by paying homage to any tangible or visible form—stirs His holy jealousy just as much as if you worshiped another god *instead* of Him—because that image isn't truly God. Whatever it is—whether it's a statue, or a stained-glass window, or a picture—it is not God; it's a poor representation of God whose glory is so brilliant it has never been seen by any man at any time.

I'm saying that if you have any kind of image that is supposed to represent the true God to you, you have violated this Commandment. If you have hanging on your wall one of those paintings that is supposed to be a picture of Christ, or any other kind of kind of picture or statue or image that represents God to you, that image is a violation of the Second Commandment. It is just as wrong to try to make an image of the true God as it is to worship a statue of Dagon.

Why? Because you *cannot* make an image of God that really shows His glory. Imagining God in the form of *any* visible image therefore actually *diminishes* His glory, and therefore it is an insult to Him. It is not an act of true worship. It is an act of idolatry that stirs His holy jealousy just as surely as if you worshiped another god.

That picture of Jesus hanging on a Christian's kitchen wall is no more a true representation of Christ than Aaron's golden calf was a true representation of Jehovah. Both are artificial images of Him, and therefore both are objects that stir His holy jealousy.

Now look at this closely: It would make perfect logical sense if this statement about God's jealousy were appended to the First Commandment: "*Do not have any other god before Me, because I am a jealous God.*" That makes perfect sense. It's logical. It's obvious. In fact, that is exactly what we find in Exodus 34:14: "**You shall worship no other god, for the LORD,**

whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God." Holy jealousy is so much a part of God's character that one of the names he goes by is "Jealous." And that is why we should have no other gods.

But I have always thought it interesting and significant that here in Exodus 20, where the Ten Commandments are given to us, this statement about God's jealousy is actually appended to the *Second* Commandment, not the First. And there's a reason for that: God's jealousy is stirred not only when we worship other gods, but also when we worship the true God in a way He has not authorized. Both are forms of idolatry, and God is jealous in both instances. He is as jealous when Israel worships Jehovah in the form of a golden calf as He is when the Egyptians worship other gods in the form of animals and bugs.

God is very jealous of His deity and His glory. He will tolerate no competition on any level. Isaiah 42:8: "**I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.**" Praise given to graven images, even if they are supposedly images representing the true God, is as abhorrent to God himself as worship offered to Baal.

And God's jealousy is a *fearsome* attribute. We are supposed to tremble at the thought that God's jealousy is offended at idolatry. In other words, this statement is given to us as an incentive to fear. It is supposed to make us afraid. Listen to Deuteronomy 4:23-24: "**Take care, lest you forget the**

covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."

And Deuteronomy 6:14-15: "You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God—lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth."

Notice, by the way, how the truth of God's jealousy is repeatedly tied to *both* the First and Second of the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy 4:23-24 points to divine jealousy as a reason to avoid graven images. That's the Second Commandment. Deuteronomy 6:14-15 cites God's jealousy as a reason to obey the First Commandment. This is why we should not go after other Gods: because God is jealous and His anger will be kindled against us if we follow other Gods.

Joshua 24:19-20: "Joshua said to the people, 'You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a *jealous* God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.'"

In Deuteronomy 32, Moses gives the people of Israel a song about their own history and the faithfulness of God. That song contained these words (Deut. 32:16): "They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him

to anger." And then in verse 21, the voice of the Lord answers with these words, **"They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation."** That is a prophetic summary of Israel's history: They provoked God's jealousy by worshiping that which is not God. And again, to worship an image, even if that image represents Jehovah to you, is to worship that which is not God.

That's what Israel did repeatedly throughout their history, beginning with Aaron's golden calf, continuing through the era of groves and strange altars during the age of the divided kingdom, and culminating in their rejection of Christ because they had made an idol of the nation itself, and the Jewish leaders saw Christ as a threat to their national sovereignty. So God provoked *them* to jealousy by turning to the Gentiles, and calling people to Himself from among those who had not been His people. The apostle Paul quotes that very prophecy of Moses in Romans 10:19, to explain why the gospel was being received by Gentiles but rejected by the Jewish nation.

So God is a jealous God, and that truth should make us *fear*. Listen to this prophecy of Zephaniah. The prophet Zephaniah says that God will eventually destroy all idolaters along with their idols. Zephaniah 1:18: **"Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of**

the LORD. [Those graven images are their gods. See if their gods will be able to help them in the day of God's wrath!] **In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth."**

So this threat of God's jealousy is given to us first of all as an incentive to *fear*. It ought to make us tremble to dishonor God by offering Him any kind of worship that is unworthy of Him, or by reducing Him to a tangible or visible image. The Lord is a jealous God, and His jealousy seethes with holy anger. Listen to Nahum 1:2: "**The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies.**"

But there is another side to God's jealousy, and it has great significance for the Christian. And I want to show it to you before we move on. Not only is God jealous for His deity, and His glory, and His own holy name—he is also jealous for *His people*. Listen to Zechariah 1:14. It uses an expression so emphatic that the King James Version renders it like this: "**Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy.**" God is jealous with a great jealousy for His people. And notice that the verse I read earlier, Nahum 1:2, says "**he [reserves] wrath for his enemies.**" God's jealousy is a threat to His enemies, but a great comfort to the saints. His jealousy in part means that He is jealous for us.

Christ is jealous for His church in the same way that a husband is jealous for his wife's purity. Joel 2:18: "**Then the LORD will be zealous for His land And will have pity on His people.**" For us, God's jealousy represents something more than the threat of anger and a motive for fear. It is a reason to have confidence and security in the Lord, because He is jealous for us.

It's a little bit like my wife's jealousy for me. Darlene is jealous for me with a godly jealousy. She is jealous for my heart and affections, as I am for hers. And on the one hand, my wife's jealousy gives me great reason to fear. If *I* ever did anything to offend her jealousy—if I ever gave the kind of affection that belongs to her to someone else, I know I would face her fury.

I have seen her express that jealousy vicariously from time to time. Every now and then, she will hear about some guy who is unfaithful to his wife, and it makes her *angry*. The worst is when it's someone we know and trust to some degree. Or we'll hear about some celebrity—or worst of all, some Christian leader—who is unfaithful to his wife. And *nothing* in all the world makes her more angry. My wife will be *furios* with whoever is unfaithful to his wife—whether we know the guy or not. And I know she is feeling empathy for the wife who was sinned against. So that anger is an expression of her jealousy for *me* and my affections. And in a very healthy way,

her jealousy fills me with fear. I never want to be the cause of her wrath.

And yet there is another sense in which that same jealousy is one of my greatest comforts in life. It makes my wife protective of me. It keeps her on guard for me. It keeps her praying for me, and it keeps her close to me.

And if we go someplace and some girl at a checkout counter tries to flirt with me or gets too friendly in conversation with me, Darlene just moves in closer to me, or puts her arm around me, as if to let it be known that I belong to her. I love it when she does that. Nothing makes me more secure or more happy to be married to her. And she does it because she is jealous for me with a godly jealousy. It a great blessings to be married to someone who truly loves you that way.

God's jealousy is like that. We ought to tremble with fear at the thought of offending His jealousy, but we can rest secure in the knowledge that that same jealousy is one of our greatest spiritual securities. God will allow no one to pluck us out of His hand. He is jealous for us in the same way that He is jealous for His own honor. It is the most pure and holy kind of jealousy. And there's a tremendous security in that.

So God is a jealous God. It's a holy jealousy—a pure and sanctified watchfulness that is the very source of our security in Christ. That's lesson number 1: God is a jealous God.

Here's a second lesson from this short passage that we are looking at today. It is—

2. A LESSON ABOUT GOD'S JUDGMENT

Look again at the second half of verse 5: "**for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.**"

Now this is a familiar expression to most of you, and I'll bet most of you have been troubled by the implications of this threat, and many of you may have been confused about what it means.

Let's begin with what is very clear on the face of it: As parents we had better be very careful, because our own children—and even our children's children—can be adversely affected, and they can in some cases even incur divine wrath, because of sins we commit.

Now, immediately, many of you will be troubled by that. Are there really generational effects of sin? Can children suffer because of the sins of their fathers? Is that just? Is it righteous to allow children to reap evil consequences from their parents' sins? What kind of justice is that?

And yet even common sense tells us that this is true. If your father is addicted to alcohol, you will inevitably reap evil

consequences because of his sin. If your parents are unfaithful to one another and their marriage ends in divorce, that will have grave and lasting consequences for their children. The sins of parents *do* invariably effect children, and often children follow the sins of their parents and imitate those very same sins, even though they have witnessed the destructive effects of sin—even though they themselves have suffered some of the disastrous consequences of those sins in their innocence. That is one of the disturbing but persistent proofs of human depravity: those who know the painful consequences of sin nonetheless often choose sin anyway. Our hearts are all bent toward sin that way, and we tend to embrace the sins of our parents. And so our parents' sins can be visited on us, because of our own sinful desires and tendencies.

That is particularly true with sins like idolatry. You can read the history of the kings of Israel after Jeroboam split the kingdom and set up golden calves for the people to worship. Every new generation of rulers in that nation followed in the sins of Jeroboam. Every king in Old Testament *Israel*—the northern kingdom that split from the Davidic line—every one of their kings left the same evil legacy, and it is recorded about each one of them that they followed in the sins of Jeroboam. They built groves, and images, and false altars in high places, and those were idols that became a stumbling-block to

subsequent generations. In fact, this went on for many, many generations, until the whole northern kingdom was finally taken captive by the Assyrians. The sin was so compounded over the generations that God finally judged that entire nation with a dreadful judgment, and they never did return as a national entity after that.

Worshiping false gods and graven images has a poisoning effect on the worshiper as well as his children. Look at the description of graven images in Psalm 115:

2 Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?"

3 Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. [In other words, our God is spiritual, and he is sovereign, not like the passive, tangible idols worshiped by the heathen.]

4 Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

5 They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.

6 They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell.

7 They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat.

8 Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.

Psalm 135:18 says the very same thing: **"Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them!"**

Here is an inviolable spiritual principle: You become just like whatever you worship. Worship dumb idols and you will

become spiritually deaf, blind, and unfeeling, just like the idols you worship. Worship images of gold and silver and spiritually you will become as cold, hard, and lifeless as they are.

The same thing is true no matter what you worship: Worship a man and you will begin to take on the characteristics of the man you worship. Worship money and I suppose you will become old, wrinkled, and dirty. Worship material things and you will become hopelessly materialistic. That is what has happened to our entire culture.

But if you worship Christ, you will become more and more like Him. And that will culminate in perfect Christlikeness when you see Him in His perfection. Scripture says (in 1 Corinthians 13:12), "**For now we see in a mirror dimly.**" We see Him dimly and imperfectly, but nonetheless (2 Corinthians 3:18): "**we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.**" As we worship Him, we are being transformed into His image. First John 3:2 says, "**Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.**"

So worshiping Christ has the effect of transforming us into His image.

But by the same token, worshipping graven images has the effect of turning the idolater into the cold, lifeless, effigy of whatever he or she worships. And that invariably builds a spiritual legacy that will affect our children and our grandchildren, and even our great grandchildren.

But notice again that this is predominantly a warning to parents, not children. This is something for you and me as parents to take to heart: if we are not careful, our sins will become an evil legacy for our children. Not only do we expose them to evil consequences when we sin, but we also give them a bad example, which they will very likely follow. Parents, if you do not want your children to follow the example of your worst evil habits, you had better break that pattern of sin in your generation.

So this verse, and the warning it contains, is placed here as a signpost for *parents*. But the principle it sets forth should not be understood in a superstitious sense by *children*.

Here's what I mean: Some people view this principle in a superstitious sense, and they falsely imagine that an evil legacy from their parents has doomed them to a life of sin or spiritual failure—or worse.

I had a friend a few years ago who was convinced that this principle meant sins are passed from one generation to another and there is nothing a child can do to escape the sins of his father. And this guy came from a troubled home where both of

his parents had committed suicide. Someone had convinced him—or he had convinced himself—that this verse meant there was nothing he could ever do to escape the sins of his parents, and the more he pondered it the more morbidly obsessed with suicide he became. And he told me plainly that he believed he too would one day commit suicide. That was his destiny, he insisted, and there was nothing he could do to escape it.

And although I counseled him, and pleaded with him from Scripture to see that it was not necessary for him to imitate the sins of his parents, he refused to let go of his conviction, and he became more and more obsessed with suicide and enslaved to superstition, and so he became more and more convinced that suicide was his destiny. He ultimately drew away from all his Christian fiends, embarked on a life of drug and alcohol abuse, and a few years after I last saw him, he *did* deliberately take his own life. His funeral was one of the saddest occasions of my life.

His belief was nothing more than evil superstition. And yet it is a superstition shared by many. Even many Christians have superstitious beliefs about this principle. Bill Gothard, for example, teaches that the generational effects of sin can become a bondage even for Christians. He has even cautioned Christian parents against adopting babies from third-world backgrounds, because he believes this will bring the generational effects of paganism and idolatry into the

Christian home. Gothard's teaching on this subject is filled with anecdotes about people who unknowingly suffer from demonic influences because of the secret sins of their parents.

That is nothing but sheer superstition. Gothard even suggests that you need to rid your home of any physical objects that may be bringing evil to you because of your parents' sins. Just to give one example, he believes that those little troll dolls that were popular in the 1960s are demonic figures, and he claims that if your mother played with troll dolls (and especially if you have kept any troll dolls in your house) you can suffer all kinds of evil effects from those dolls—including illness, misfortune, difficulty in childbirth, and so on. And he instructs his followers to remove all the troll dolls from their houses and perform a kind of exorcism if they want to be free from the effects of those dolls. (Bill Gothard doesn't like Cabbage Patch dolls, either. He claims that they can be a source of demonic influence if you keep them in your house.)

That teaching has more in common with witchcraft and voodoo than with biblical Christianity, and it is not at all what this principle is aiming to teach us.

This is supposed to be a warning to *parents* not to engage in willful sin and idolatry; it is not a principle that should make Christians superstitious and fearful about unknown demonic

influences they might suffer from whatever sins their parents have committed.

And you can see that from this passage itself. Look again at verse 5, and notice the words at the end of the verse: "**I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.**" People who hate God and who *participate* in their parents' sins are the ones who suffer the consequences of the parents' sins—not Christians who love God. In fact, look at the promise of verse 6. This is the promise God gives those who love Him and keep His commandments: "**[He shows] steadfast love to thousands of those who love [Him] and keep [His] commandments.**"

So there is a way to break the generational cycle of sins, and it is simply to turn from the sins of your parents and follow Christ. The redemption purchased by Christ breaks not only the bondage of sin, but also the generational effects of it. There is nothing in Scripture that ever gives Christians reason to fear that they might suffer God's wrath against the sins of their parents. On the contrary, According to Romans 5:1-2, "**Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.**"

And that brings us to a third truth we can glean from this passage. It is—

3. A LESSON ABOUT GOD'S JUSTICE

God does not wantonly visit the sins of parents upon believing children who love Him. In fact, this passage culminates in a wonderful promise of grace and mercy to those who love God. It's a simple principle: Love God, and keep His commandments—and you will be free from the bondage of sin, including the negative effects of your parent's sins. If you love God, you can bask in His mercy. That is the whole point of this passage. Don't miss the promise that is attached to the warning.

We are not supposed to live under a superstitious fear that our destiny is determined by the sins of our parents. The cycle of sin and its consequences *can* be broken. The blessing of God can rest on you and your family regardless of how evil your parents may have been. You should not imagine that you are doomed to a life of misery and pain just because your father may have been a drunkard or a thief. God pours out His mercy on those who love Him and keep His commandments.

This is a glorious promise that explains how the human race, stemming from fallen ancestors, can nevertheless enjoy the mercy and benevolence of our gracious God.

There's an important principle about divine justice that underlies this promise: God does not punish innocent people for the sins of someone else. This principle is spelled out in detail in Ezekiel 18. I referred to Ezekiel 18 at the very beginning. Turn there, and let's look at it. Ezekiel 18. Ezekiel writes:

18:1 The word of the LORD came to me:

2 "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?

3 As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.

4 Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

5 "If a man is righteous and does what is just and right--[etc., etc.] . . .

v. 9 [If he] walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully--he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord GOD.

Verse 18:

18 As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.

19 "Yet you say, 'Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?' When the son has done what is just

and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live.

20 The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

21 "But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

22 None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live.

So we are *not* automatically doomed to suffer from the guilt of our parents. Only those who follow their parents' sins and perpetuate the evil will suffer the consequences of their parents' sins. For them, their judgment may be compounded because of the sins of their parents, and the principle of Exodus 20:5 will apply. So the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children for generations, if the children continue hating God.

But the cycle is broken for those who repent and turn to the Lord. Christians who love Christ and break with the unbelief and idolatry of their parents do not need to fear the judgment of God for their parents' sins. God is not unjust to visit the sins of the parents upon a repentant generation.

If you have idols in your home—graven images and religious icons that are the remnants of an idolatrous heritage—and especially if you are tempted to regard those images as representations of God—then by all means, get rid of them. *But not because of some superstitious belief that the image contains some demonic power against you.* In 1 Corinthians 8:4, Paul said, "**we know that 'an idol has no real existence,' and that 'there is no God but one.'**" We don't fear evil power from some inanimate object. Superstition like that merely perpetuates the sin of the idolatry.

But the key to escaping this threat is to repudiate the sins of earlier generations and turn our hearts to God, realizing that He is a spirit and must be worshiped in Spirit and in truth.

And if you love Him and worship God rightly—in spirit and in truth—you need not fear that He will visit upon you the sins of any previous generation. Listen again to Ezekiel 18:20: "**The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.**"

I don't know how to say it any more plainly: No Christian will ever bear God's wrath for his or her parents' sins. Why? Because Christ Himself bore all our sins and suffered the full penalty on our behalf. Even though we are not perfectly righteous, we have been fully forgiven. Christ bore our

iniquities, and we now bear the merit of His perfect righteousness. And therefore every believer falls into the category described in Ezekiel 18:20. The righteousness of the righteous is upon us—not the guilt of our parents' sins.

Isaiah 53:11: "**by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.**" First Peter 1:24: "**He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.**"

And that is what we learn about divine justice from this passage. God Himself has broken the cycle of generational sin for us, so that instead of visiting our parents' sins upon us, God has credited us with the perfect righteousness of our Savior. That is the gospel in a nutshell, and it is the glorious truth we are led to by a proper understanding of the law.

The law, looked at in isolation, would seem to leave us hopeless. But here we see that even in the law itself, there is a glimmer of the gospel, and it is evident in this promise found in Exodus 20:6—that God will show mercy unto thousands who love Him and keep His commandments.

That mercy is embodied in Christ, who is Himself the very image of God, "**the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,**" according to Hebrews 1:3. Colossians 1:15 says Christ "**is the image of the invisible God,**" and 2 Corinthians 4:4 echoes that, saying Christ "**is the image of**

God." Any other kind of image is a poor substitute, and God, who is a jealous God, forbids us to worship such images. So Christ alone is a fitting object of our worship.