

# Self-Responsibility in an Age of Blame-Shifting

Good morning everyone, it's so great to see all of you and be back up here after a little hiatus. For those of you I haven't met, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor in training on staff here. I usually lead music here on Sundays and I have the privilege of teaching every now and then, but I've had some time off both of those things because my wife Sara and I recently had a baby. So while that is super exciting and rewarding and fun, please bear with me as I'm still mostly hobbling through each day on caffeine and prayers.

As I think tends to happen, having a kid has made me spend more time remembering all kinds of stuff from when I was kid. So I'm the youngest of 3 in my family. My sister is the oldest and my brother is the middle. As a kid, I was mortified at the very *thought* of getting in trouble. I *hated* it. Some kids need more discipline than others, but I was the kind of kid that could catch a sideways glance from my parents and I would melt into tears at the notion that I could possibly get told off. So, naturally, I would do whatever I could feasibly do to make sure that didn't happen. And I don't mean I would never do anything wrong, I mean I would do whatever I could possibly do to make sure someone else caught the blame for whatever I did.

Like I said, I'm the youngest, which also means I'm blessed and highly favored. Can I get an amen from the youngests in the room? And my brother being the middle child often found himself in the middle of most of the shenanigans that happened in our house, whether he instigated it or not. And he didn't love that he often ended up under the microscope of scrutiny, so he was pretty quick to try to defend himself to our parents whether he did anything or not. And let's be honest, nothing makes a kid look more guilty than them yelling that they didn't do anything.

I've mentioned before we lived in South Asia, and the houses all had flat roofs and we had glass covered solar panels up there. My brother and I had very strict instructions not to go around the solar panels because they were sloped at a steep angle and at the very top of the 3 story concrete building, so it was really dangerous up there. So we were up there one day using them like slides, timing it just right to put our feet down at the bottom of the panels to stop ourselves from continuing and sliding *off* the roof and falling 40+ feet to the ground. Makes sense that we weren't supposed to be up there.

On one attempt, my brother put his feet down too soon, and he stuck his heels straight through the glass. He punched a hole straight through. And when our mom heard the breaking glass on the roof, she came to investigate. And my brother said, "I wasn't sliding on the solar panels like you said we shouldn't, also the glass broke somehow."

And I was standing there saying my token catchphrase, “not me mommy,” as she’s looking at two side by side butt marks on the dusty glass of the solar panels. But I knew as long as I held out long enough, I was able to fade into the shadows while he got in trouble.

And I very quickly learned that no matter what things I got into, as long as my brother was around and I stayed quiet long enough once we got caught, I had pretty close to a 100% success rate at making sure he got all the blame. And I milked that for *years*. We’ve talked about it as adults and reconciled those things and we have a great relationship, but he was such a great magnet for blame when we were younger.

Now, obviously my brother wasn’t around for every single aspect of my life, but my tendency to try to get out of trouble certainly was always present. Like I said, I didn’t try to avoid doing anything wrong, I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t catching the blame. And while your life may look different than that, I don’t think it’s a stretch to assume some version of this tendency has shown itself in your life. **Blame-shifting, in one form or another, is just a built-in part of the human condition. One way or another, to one degree or another, we all love to find ways to blame things on other people.**

If you’re joining us for the first time or the first time in a little while, we are getting towards the end of a series that’s all about how followers of Jesus are called to be set apart from the rest of the world around us. In Jesus’ own words, his followers are meant to be like “a city on a hill.” Something that stands out, something that’s clearly distinct from its surroundings. A beacon of sorts. And one of the most *important* ways of doing that in my opinion is that followers of Jesus should be displaying **self-responsibility in an age of blame-shifting**.

First, let’s talk about the “blame-shifting” part of that statement. Go ahead and turn with me to the beginning of Scripture in **Genesis chapter 3**. If you’ve been around church much at all, odds are you’re pretty familiar with this story. And even if you haven’t, this is a pretty widely recognized story in the church world. Verses 1-7 shows us a conversation between “the serpent,” which is the name used for Satan in the passage, and the first humans, Adam and Eve. What we end up seeing is the first instance of sin entering the world. The first time people have gone against God’s commands in some way.

Adam and Eve are presented with a series of questions and clever lies and temptation, and they give in and disobey God. And what do they do in response? They own up to everything and repent and all is well! Not exactly. They immediately felt shame and tried to cover everything up. We’ll pick up the passage in verse 8:

*8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"*

*10 He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

We see it start immediately. Adam and Eve feel shame, they try to cover themselves, and they immediately start trying to dodge God. God, the Creator of all things who, until quite recently, had a deeply personal and intimate relationship with them. The very first response is a version of blame-shifting and deflection. God asks, "where are you?" And Adam responds with "I heard you coming, and I got scared because I was naked, so I'm hiding." Which is a ridiculous response if you think about it. None of those things make sense as an answer to God's question. Especially since God has been present in the garden the whole time, and Adam has been naked the whole time.

This would be like if Sara came home from work and said, "Eric, where are you?" And I respond from somewhere else in the house, "well, the thing is, I heard your car when you pulled in, and I realized I hadn't done any of the dishes, so I'm hiding. Also I was naked." To which she might respond, "well, now I have *more* questions." But she would almost certainly feel a little confused because none of that has anything to do with her question of, "where are you?" Interesting situation. Let's keep reading:

*11 And he [God] said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"*

*12 The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."*

So immediately after this bizarre non-answer, Adam is confronted and asked directly if he did the *one thing* God commanded him not to do. His *very first* response is not to apologize, it's not to show remorse, it's not to repent or anything like that. His first response is to blame Eve, and in the same breath he goes on to imply that it's actually God's fault. "The woman, you know the one **you put here with me**, it's her fault. And really, while we're talking about it, it couldn't be *her* fault without first kind of being *your* fault for putting her here." What a wild response. He's clearly not thinking about *anything* other than deflect, deflect, deflect. He wanted the spotlight off of him so badly that he even said to God himself, "this is *your* fault." And instead of obliterating him right then and there, God keeps the questions going, keep reading:

13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

And Eve follows suit by immediately responding with her own blame-shifting. That's a bold strategy from both of them if I've ever heard one. But not only is it a bold strategy, it's the *first ever* strategy. In fact, it seems to be the *only* strategy. As soon as sin enters the picture, blame-shifting is the very first response. And as creative and innovative as humanity is in general, we really haven't changed our tone at all.

There's just something about our nature that instantly and instinctively feels inadequate and looks for something or someone to blame for that feeling. Whether we blame our situation, or our upbringing, or the "pressure" we were under, or any variety of other things. Sometimes we do it without even consciously realizing that's what we're doing. We just look for any way we can take some of the onus of responsibility off of *our* shoulders, and just put it onto something or someone else. Blame-shifting feels like such a baked in part of the human condition.

I want to spend our time today unpacking in a little more detail what the response of blame-shifting really is and why I think it's so prevalent. And I want to help us see some of the really sneaky ways it infiltrates our lives. But most importantly, I want to spend some time looking to Jesus as both our example and solution.

I think the concept of blame-shifting is relatively self-explanatory, but I want us to look a little more critically first to really understand it. I was going to try to come up with a nifty definition, but instead I found someone else who did a better job summarizing it than I think I could. Here's how they described the process: "We believe lies to enter sin, and then we try to cover up our shame, dismiss it, hide from consequences, protect, and self-justify once inside it. Then, when we are called to account, we try to get out of it by offering some excuse about why it's not really our fault."<sup>1</sup>

I think that's an excellent summary of the passage we just read, but also an incredibly accurate description of the common human response. The world at large outside of the Church would leave out the first part of that definition about entering sin, but I think most people would actually agree across the board that this is how people function. When we as humans get called out, we want to shift the spotlight on to someone or something else. But it's also much more prevalent than just trying to get out of trouble. People

---

<sup>1</sup> Jared C. Wilson (Midwestern Seminary)

blame-shift all the time in an attempt to make themselves feel justified in whatever thing they're doing in life. Let me show you what I mean.

Let's say someone has a quick temper or struggles with anger as a theme in their life. You may hear them say something like, "I wouldn't lose my temper so much if my kids just behaved better. I wouldn't be so frustrated all the time if my spouse was just more considerate or if they were more helpful. I wouldn't be so mad if my boss wasn't such a tool." Or maybe someone has been told they're impatient. "I would be a *very* patient person if it weren't for traffic on 640 and those terrible people who take up the whole aisle walking at a snail's pace at the grocery store. If I didn't have so many things to do, and if the people around me weren't so slow, I'd never need to be impatient!" "I wouldn't be judgemental if everyone around me wasn't so ignorant or incompetent."

"If I could just find a spouse I wouldn't struggle so much with lust." "I know for a fact that I wouldn't be so anxious about my life and my future if I just had a better job and more money. In fact, not only would I not be anxious, I would also be such a generous person too if that happened."

"Listen, I *would* have an active spiritual life and I wouldn't struggle with nearly as much sin as I do if my LifeGroup was just more encouraging and helpful to me. I wouldn't be dealing with spiritual apathy if I wasn't so busy or so tired every day."

"If our president aligned more closely with my personal preferences and the issues I think are important, I would joyfully submit to the governing authorities and pray for them like Scripture says." "I'm not really one to *start* gossip, but I also don't think I should lie to the people around me when *they* start a conversation about someone I don't like and they ask me what I think. I can't *not* share the things I know." "I wouldn't be so isolated or lonely if people in my LifeGroup just did more of the stuff I liked to do, or if other people just invited me to more stuff."

Or maybe it's something from the past that people point to as a reason for the way they live their life. Something like, "well I probably wouldn't be this harsh to my wife or my kids, but it's how my dad treated us, so here we are." "My parents were so strict and made me feel so bad for doing anything they didn't want me to do, so that's why I don't give my kids any structure or rules regardless of what Scripture says. It's *my parent's* doing. I have to do it this way now." "It's my youth pastor's fault from high school that I'm not a part of the Church anymore. The way he led made me not want to follow Jesus." "My old small group leader or pastor is the reason I don't want to get plugged in or involved in a Church again."

Now, I want to be very clear before we move on something that I am *not* saying. I am *not* trying to make the point that other people *never* have a negative impact on our lives. I am not trying to say that we are not affected by the harm other people cause us. If that is part of your story, my heart breaks for you and I want healing for you. I want you to be able to experience the Lord's overflowing love for you and I want you to be able to find rest and redemption in the arms of Jesus. We want this to be a safe place to be able to work through your pain and experience healing. I fully know and understand that all of that can absolutely have an impact on the way we see our life, and the way we view ourselves, as well as any number of other things.

But there is a difference between *acknowledging* the ways people and situations have impacted us in our life, and *blaming* all of our frustrations and discontentment in life on those people and those things. The former is productive: it helps us get to the bottom of what's going on so that we can deal with it and heal from it, even if that takes time to do. The latter is paralyzing: it makes us entirely the victim of life circumstances and actually prevents a lot of healing that needs to take place.

The reality is, we've got all sorts of excuses for the things we do or the way we act. And it comes up all throughout our lives. Some of those examples might sound silly to you, and some of them might feel incredibly personal. What it really comes down to is that we as humans are always looking for *someone* or *something* outside of ourselves to point to as the reason for why our lives look a certain way.

We want someone or something to point at when we get confronted or accused of doing something wrong, just like in the story we read. But we also really want something to point at and blame for other aspects of life that aren't the way we wish they were. We want something to blame for our discontentment. We want something to blame for the inconveniences we experience. We want someone or something to blame for our life's frustrations, for the type of person we've become and the type of life that we live.

And the prevalence of blame-shifting in our world is so interesting to me because somehow, all of us simultaneously do this all the time, and we are also always so bothered by it when other people do it. **Think about that person at work that always seems to have some absurd reason why they haven't turned in something on time *again*. How frustrating is that? Or the guy who shows up 15 minutes late *every single time* and there's always something that caused it. "I got stuck at a train! There was a car on fire on the interstate! My kids kept me up so late again, my wife unplugged my alarm clock, my toast caught on fire in the toaster." Stop with the excuses and just leave 15 minutes earlier!** It's infuriating. But it's such a strange phenomenon. I don't know of many other things in our world that are both so prevalent and so widely disliked.

So why do we do this? Why have people all throughout history done this? Like the definition I said earlier, why do we so readily offer “some excuse about why it’s not really our fault”? I think it’s really similar to how we end up falling into sin in the first place. Sin is deceptive. But it’s also enticing. We’ve talked about this before, but Satan uses lies and tactics that lure us in because they seem so satisfying. And when we end up in sin, the same cycle continues in blame-shifting.

Blame-shifting seems to promise us relief. It seems to promise us a way out. We think what we’re doing is taking the weight, taking the responsibility of whatever is happening off our own shoulders and moving it on to someone else. And we don’t care about or think about who that person is. We don’t think about what kind of pain it may cause them or how ridiculous our blame might actually be. Think about the passage we read. Adam points straight at *God himself* as the reason for his sin. We believe this lie that if we can just deflect enough, we can shrug off this crushing burden. And sometimes it really does feel like there might be a glimpse of relief when we do it. Otherwise we wouldn’t keep doing it.

But let me help you see something. If everything that happens is someone else’s fault around us, we’ll never actually find any relief. We can never escape at that point. Constant blame-shifting actually just digs us deeper and deeper into this pit. Ultimately, we end up more and more at the mercy of everyone and everything around us. We end up more and more under the control of others because we’ll always be subject to whatever everyone else does. We end up trapped.

We have absolutely zero control over what other people do and don’t do. We have zero control over them not saying hurtful things, doing hurtful things. There is no such thing as a world where no one ever hurts us. And if everything about us being the way we are is because of other people or extenuating circumstances, that means we have no hope of ever changing. Because the world will always be like that. So blame-shifting *feels* at first like it might take a weight off of our shoulders. But in return, it places a weight *on* our shoulders that we can never take off. Because we cannot control the world around us.

So if blame-shifting doesn’t actually solve anything for us, how do we even approach life differently? Because of everything we’ve talked about until this point, I hope it’s starting to become clear just how impactful followers of Jesus can be by living differently from the world around us. And to get there, I think it’s essential for us to start with looking to Jesus. We can look at Jesus for both our example of how to live *and* our source for the ability to do it. He gives us both the *method* and the *mechanism* for living this way.

Look with me at Isaiah chapter 53. Isaiah is a book in the Bible that talks about the sins of God's people and the judgment to come, but it *also* spends a significant amount of time talking about the hope that is coming. Isaiah describes the Savior who is coming, who we all know is Jesus, and what he is going to do and be like. And in chapter 53, we get a really beautiful description of what will happen. Take a look starting in verse 3:

*3 He [this is Jesus] was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. 4 Surely he took up **our** pain and bore **our** suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. 5 **But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.** 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and **the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.** 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; **for the transgression of my people he was punished.***

There's a few things happening here, but I want us to focus on a theme that's laid out in this whole passage. Over and over in this passage we see this idea of justice being done and punishment being doled out, but not where it was supposed to go. It says it over and over: verse 4 says, "**he** took up **our** pain and bore **our** suffering..." Verse 5: "**he** was pierced for **our** transgressions, **he** was crushed for **our** iniquities; the punishment that brought **us** peace was on **him**..." Verse 6: "the Lord has laid on **him** the iniquity of **us all**."

Isaiah is describing the way Jesus steps in and willingly takes blame and punishment on himself that is meant for someone else. We see a picture of Jesus accepting responsibility for things that are not his fault. We see an incredibly perplexing, backwards version of blame-shifting where Jesus says to God, "put it on me. I'll take their blame." You see, our tendency as humans, all the way back to the beginning, is to take everything that *is* our responsibility and try to offload it on someone else. But Jesus came into the picture and said, "I want to take *everything* even though *none of it* is my responsibility."

Jesus is the only person who has ever lived and ever will live who does not deserve any blame. Jesus was faced with all the temptations that exist in our world, but instead of giving in and going against God's commands, he demonstrates perfect obedience. He is



truly blameless. But instead of sitting comfortably at a distance in his perfection, Jesus willingly takes on all the blame we deserve *and* all the blame we attempt to transfer to others. What an incredible reality.

Now at this point, hopefully you're seeing the beauty of what Jesus did, but I'm also guessing there's at least some question as to what that might mean for us as followers of Jesus going forward. How do we live as a city on a hill, a people set apart in light of Jesus living a perfect life and taking all the blame we deserve? We can't be perfect and take responsibility for everyone's wrongs, like Jesus did. And that exact mentality actually puts some of us into a different trap. I'm not sure who needs to hear this, but you can't *be* Jesus for other people. You can show them what Jesus is like, you can serve and sacrifice and love, but You can't take on the responsibility and weight of their sin. We should be grieved and stirred with compassion, but If we are in this room and we struggle with anxiety, fear, and guilt over sins committed by others, we need to hear that **THAT** is the burden Jesus carried.

But for those of us who are more inclined to blame-shift away, what *does* this mean? For followers of Jesus, our sin being paid for and the punishment we deserve being put on him is the beginning. It's the front door for us to enter into an entirely different way of life than the world around us. That's what this whole series has been about. So for the last bit of our time today, I want to unpack some of what that means for us. Like I said at the beginning, how can we display self-responsibility in an age of blame-shifting?

It all starts with what we just read in Isaiah. Through Jesus' work on the cross, our sin no longer counts against us. It's not that the sin is gone, but the cost has been paid. Justice has been done, so now followers of Jesus are able to live free from the crushing burden of the cost of sin. So now, because "he was pierced for our transgressions, [and]...crushed for our iniquities; [and] the punishment [for our sins] ... was on him," like the passage says, we are offered freedom from the guilt associated with our sin. And not only the guilt, but the shame that comes with it too. Jesus didn't just pay for one or the other.

So now that we're offered freedom from shame, we actually have no need to blame-shift at all. Because we've been reconciled to God, we are able to live in pursuit of reconciliation instead of trying in vain to justify ourselves or hide or dodge taking responsibility for things we've done. The passage says we are a *new creation*. We have a completely new, secure identity. We are not defined by the things we've done, so we have no need to hide behind excuses. Instead, we can live in light of that new identity. So I want to end with a couple ways I think followers of Jesus can implement this in their lives. First...

## Take Responsibility

Because Jesus took the shame away from our sin, we now have total freedom to accept responsibility for ourselves without fear. **How unbelievably different and refreshing would this look in everyday life? How many arguments or fights have been started or perpetuated because of “he said/she said” nonsense? How many people have experienced hurt because they’ve been blamed for something they didn’t do? How many times has trust been broken because someone has been lied to by someone they trust and care about because they were ashamed of something they’ve done? How many people live in constant fear of being found out for something because they’ve felt the need to cover up and hide beneath shame?**

We can take responsibility for our sin directly and immediately when we are confronted with it. But we also have the opportunity to go a step further through confession. Because of the freedom we’ve been given through Christ, we are able to confess openly with other followers of Jesus and take full responsibility for the things in our lives. And I mean *truly* taking responsibility. Not, “I’m sorry you feel that way,” or, “I only did this because you did that.” I mean a real, “I’m sorry I did that. I’m sorry I said that. Here’s the reality of what I did.” Because of Jesus we can display self-responsibility.

And do you realize the freedom that this brings to others? Imagine with me for a moment that you are in one of those frustrating situations like we talked about last week. Someone has offended you or hurt you. You are torn up inside and you are struggling to take those frustrations to God. You’d really like to lash out, you’d really like to gossip. You’d really like them to know how badly they have hurt you. Can you picture a time that’s happened? Now imagine with me for a moment that person walking up to you, unprompted, and saying something like this, “Eric, listen, the other day I said and did some things that really hurt you. I hate that I caused you pain and I’m sorry for treating you that way.” Can you imagine how helpful that would be if someone did that towards you? Okay, now *be that* person to others. That’s what we’re talking about. *That’s* different, *that* stands out. And the second way that we can implement these truths is this:

## Entrust It All To Jesus

We’ve talked already about the freedom we have in Jesus now because he has paid the cost for our sin. That’s part of entrusting everything to Jesus. His death is also big enough to pay for all the wrongs ever done to you. He’s big enough to cover the cost of everything and to use everything to continue to transform you to look to him more and to look more like him in the end. Like I said earlier, this doesn’t mean ignoring things that have happened in your life. Just like our sin isn’t ignored because of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Jesus paid for your sin and all the sins that have been committed against you. We know this is true, but we often don't *feel* like that weight has been lifted off. Bring your pain to Jesus. Don't pretend you haven't been hurt. *Acknowledge specific ways you have been hurt to Jesus*, and then let him do the work of healing in you as a result.

There's such beautiful freedom offered to us if we're willing to look to Jesus and ask for the moving of the Holy Spirit in us through his word and through his people.

Intro communion and pray..