

## Sour Grapes – The Nature of Inherited Character Weaknesses

When my brother-in-law Mandy met my brother-in-law Ken, he exclaimed, 'You must be a member of the Johnson family!' 'Yes, I am,' replied Ken. 'How did you know?' 'It is quite obvious,' said Mandy. 'You look just like your father!' When Hannah was thirty-five years old, she began to feel pains around her heart and up and down her left arm. When she went to the doctor, he asked her about her family's medical history. She then explained that both her mother and grandmother died of heart failure before the age of forty-five. Peter was a likable person, and people enjoyed his company – except when he became violently angry. The unpredictable outbursts happened mostly at work. His employees lived in constant dread that something would *set him off*. During a counseling session, he explained that for no apparent reason he would encounter overpowering emotions of anger. He also stated that his father and grandfather experienced the same problem.

It is quite obvious that the physical features of parents are passed on to their children through the dominant and recessive factors in their genes. Ample scientific data also indicates that the tendencies for various diseases are passed on from parents to children. What about the character flaws and weaknesses of parents? Do they directly affect the emotions or actions of their sons and daughters? This question must be answered by anyone who is committed to getting lasting solutions to the complex personal, marriage and family problems of our day.

Within the Ten Commandments, God strategically posted a warning notice for all to read and hear: “*For I, Adonai your God, am a jealous God, bringing the iniquity (avón, עון) of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, <sup>6</sup>but showing lovingkindness to the thousands of generations of those who love Me and keep My mitzvot*” (Exodus 20:5-6). To make sure that this message is not overlooked, God repeats it three more times (Ex. 34:7, Nu. 14:18, and Deut. 5:9-10). Moses, Jeremiah, Daniel, Nehemiah and others realized the seriousness of this warning. They understood that God wanted them to agree with Him about the iniquities of their parents and purpose to not continue them. Therefore, they took the initiative to acknowledge the iniquities of their fathers when they confessed their own sins (Nu. 14:17-20, Jer. 14:20, Daniel 9:16, and Nehemiah 9:2).

### The “Sour Grapes” Theory

Some people choose to believe that the character faults of parents have no direct influence on their children. They point to the passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel that explain that the children should not suffer for the sins of their parents, nor the parents for the sins of their children: “<sup>28</sup>*In those days they will no longer say: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are blunted.’ <sup>29</sup>Rather each will die for his own iniquity: if anyone eats the sour grapes, his own teeth will be blunted*” (Jer. 31:29-30). An attempt to use this passage to nullify the Scriptural message is futile, because in the next chapter God restates it: “<sup>18</sup>*You are the One doing mercy to thousands, but repaying the iniquity of the fathers into the lap of their children after them. Great, mighty God, Adonai-Tzva’ot is His Name! <sup>19</sup>Great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of men, to give each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds*” (Jeremiah 32:18-19). This passage reaffirms a basic message in Scripture: a person is responsible for his own sins. A son cannot blame his father for his sin, nor can a father blame his son. God will reward each person on the merits of his own actions.

Ezekiel 18:2-3 reveals additional insight on this matter: “<sup>2</sup>*What do you mean by using this proverb in the land of Israel saying, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, so the children’s teeth are set on edge?’ <sup>3</sup>As I live—it is a declaration of Adonai—“you will never again use this proverb in Israel. <sup>4</sup>Behold, every living soul is Mine—the soul of father as well as the soul of son—both are Mine. Behold, the soul who sins is the one who will die”*” The people in the days of Ezekiel and Jeremiah were misusing this proverb by blaming their forefathers for their sins.

The contexts of the 'sour grapes' passages clarifies that God is not lifting the original notice of visiting iniquities upon future generations. Iniquities of the father may influence their children but each person will die for his own sins: “*he will not die for the iniquity of his father, he will surely live ... <sup>19</sup>Yet you say, ‘Why does the son not bear the iniquity of the father with him?’ When the son has done what is lawful and right, has kept all My statutes and has done them, he will surely live*” (Ez. 18:17b, 19). God then makes a distinction between bearing and visiting iniquity.