

Our Spiritual Responsibility

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In the realm of spiritual abstractions, there are many that are more pleasant than the concept of responsibility. When we are responsible for a task, it's our job to see that that task is carried out, and if we don't get the job done, we will be held accountable. It doesn't matter whether we want to carry out that responsibility or not. We have to do it.

It's not surprising that in a culture as undisciplined as ours is, the idea of responsibility is increasingly unpopular. The poster child for this refusal to be responsible is the 30-year-old who lives in his parents' basement and devotes himself to playing video games online. He's dependent on Mom and Dad even for the food that he eats, he has no ambitions to get a job or do anything else, and he is perfectly content with a life of total irresponsibility.

He might be an extreme example, but this same irresponsible attitude can show up in any of us. We can wander through life making foolish and lazy decisions, but when we suffer financially because of those decisions, we blame our circumstances instead of ourselves. We find ourselves entrapped in some sin, but rather than owning up to the evil choices that we freely made, we go looking for a scapegoat. We say that we were the victim of some genetic quirk, or of bad parenting, or of some bad environment, so that we can pin the blame on anyone or anything but ourselves. Even major corporations can get into the act. I read a few weeks ago that BP is now attempting to disclaim responsibility for the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, even though it was their oil rig that blew up and polluted half the ocean.

Those arguments might allow us to fool ourselves. They may even fool people around us. However, they won't fool God. When Harry Truman was president, he had a sign on his desk that read, "The buck stops here", and brethren, when it comes to our lives, the buck stops with us. We need to recognize and embrace our spiritual responsibility.

General Responsibilities.

First on the list of things that we are responsible for is **OUR SALVATION**. Paul puts this quite plainly in Philippians 2:12-13. This highlights one of the great tensions present in Christianity. God could have set up a system in which everyone, no matter how wicked, was automatically cleansed by the blood of Christ and thus was bound for heaven. He didn't do that. Instead, even though every one of us is doomed without the grace of Jesus, we still have to work for our own salvation. As Peter notes in 1 Peter 4, the righteous are only saved with difficulty, and much of the difficulty is on our end. It's possible for us to get to heaven, but it certainly isn't easy. That's why it's an upward call.

This offers each one of us, then, a useful opportunity for self-analysis. How hard are we working, right now, to become better disciples who are more pleasing to God? In this consideration, our actual spiritual attainments are irrelevant. What's important is not where we are, but where we're headed, and if we're drifting along, not really fighting any spiritual battles, that's a bad sign. All of us have things we need to be praying about and working on, whether evil things we are doing or good things we aren't. That struggle is the essence of discipleship.

As part of this trouble, we must also accept responsibility for **OUR SINS**. James explains why we sin in James 1:13-15. We don't get to paint God as the bad guy. Instead, we're the ones who are at fault. This is not what the world around us believes. In the Darwinian model of our existence, none of us really have free will. Instead, all of our decisions are the result of our genetic heritage and our environment. According to this way of thinking, we are no more capable of genuine moral choice than a cat or a dog. Obviously, this is very popular with people who want to sin. The homosexual can claim that he's just obeying a genetic compulsion. The alcoholic can say he was driven to drink by a bad marriage. The adulterer can blame the poor male role models he had growing up. In the end, no one's responsible for anything.

Now, I'm not going to deny that our genes and our environment play a role in shaping who we are, but at the end of the day, the choice is our own. When we are tempted, we are enticed to do evil, but we are not forced to do it. We always have the option of doing right instead. This is a more hopeful view of humanity because it means that all of us have the potential to be better than we are, but it's also a more sobering view. After all, if every one of us can do right all the time, then it's fair for God to expect us to do right, and fair for Him to punish us if we do not.

Because we are culpable for our sins, we are also responsible for **OUR UNDERSTANDING** of God's will. Consider with me Ephesians 5:17. Here, we are not just encouraged, but commanded to grasp God's expectations for us, and God wouldn't ask us to do this if we weren't capable of doing it. Just as is true of human laws, ignorance of God's law is no excuse. If I get pulled over by a cop for doing 75 in a 55, he's not going to care that I didn't see the construction speed limit sign two miles back. All he's going to care about is how fast his radar gun says I was going. Likewise, we aren't going to be able to plead ignorance on the day of judgment. All God will care about is what we actually did.

This means that each one of us has a solemn responsibility to learn the will of God. Our souls are quite literally at stake. Knowledge of the Scripture is still no guarantee—after all, at that point, we still have to practice it. However, if we are ignorant, that's a death sentence. That's why it's so critically important for us to be here every time the doors are

opened at the very least. The Bible class next Wednesday evening may be the one that opens our eyes to the danger we're in and leads us to make life-saving changes. If we're not there, we may have eternity to regret our error. In short, the more we learn, the safer we will be. Let's treat the word and the teaching of the word with the respect it deserves.

One of the most important lessons that we will learn from Scripture is that we are responsible for **OUR BRETHREN**. Look at the description of God's design for the church in 1 Corinthians 12:24-25. This tells us something critical about human nature. God could have made His service a solitary thing, so that none of us had anything to do with the Christians outside of our families. However, He didn't do that, and He didn't do it because He knew that it would be a disaster. None of us are strong enough to make it to heaven on our own. We need one another.

It follows from this that we need to be there when other Christians need us. When we come together, we need to pay attention to who's there and who's not there, and then do what we can to reach out to those who aren't. We need to be friends for our brethren on the margins, so that there is no one who passes through these doors who feels overlooked or unwelcome. If we don't do that, we leave those fringe Christians horribly vulnerable to Satan. If they fall away, God will hold them to account for that, but He'll also hold us to account for not loving them like a brother should.

Specific Responsibilities.

In our interactions with other Christians and with people generally, we must recognize that we are responsible for **OUR SPEECH**. No lesser authority than Jesus makes this point in Matthew 12:36-37. To me, at least, this is one of those passages that makes you go quiet and thoughtful. I can see God being angry with me if I speak words that are meant to wound or to entice into sin, but that's not where the bar is. Instead, God is also angry with the words I speak idly. I can thoughtlessly say something to my wife that hurts her feelings greatly, not really have thought about it at all, and still be condemned for it on the day of judgment. Our words are extremely dangerous, not least to ourselves.

This tells us how careful we must be with our speech. I guarantee you that when engineers are preparing an old building for demolition, they don't go around smoking or playing catch with blasting caps. Instead, they are very cautious with every move they make, because they know that inattention can be deadly. We must learn that same caution in the use of our tongues. Before we let a word pass our lips, we should think about how we're going to explain it to God.

As a subset of this, we must be careful and responsible with **OUR WORD**. Jesus, once again, highlights this issue in Matthew 5:37. The Jews of the time of Christ had constructed an elaborate hierarchy of oaths not as a way of reassuring others, but of fooling them. For example, the Pharisees taught that if a man swore by the temple, he was not obliged to carry out his oath, but if he swore by the gold in the temple, the oath was binding. Unless you knew the secret code, you could easily be fooled. Jesus, though, replaced this with a system in which there were no levels, because a disciple should stand behind every single promise he makes. When we give our word, we must always carry it out.

This is true even if we have promised to our hurt. Just because I'm now underwater on my mortgage does not mean that I have an excuse to mail the keys to the bank and walk away from the house. Just because my business is taking a beating on a contract I signed doesn't give me the right to stop carrying out the terms of that contract. Of course, if we are literally incapable of continuing to honor our word, that's one thing, but if we quit because it's hard on us to keep going, that's evil in the eyes of God. No matter the promise, we must honor it as best we are able.

We are also responsible for **OUR OBLIGATIONS**. Paul defines what some of these obligations are with respect to government in Romans 13:7. Most of us here are natural-born citizens. We didn't choose to be born here, but as long as we are here, there are some things that we must do. As should be a no-brainer to all of us, Christians don't get to cheat on their taxes. However, we don't just owe our rulers money. We owe them honor and respect. This can be difficult, and not just for the obvious reasons. We are citizens of a democracy. We elect our leaders, and as part of that, it's legitimate for us to discuss what we like and dislike about certain candidates, and it's even legitimate for us to discuss their performance in office once they're elected. We can do all those things and still be respectful. However, it's not respectful for us to show hatred and contempt for our leaders, either through words or implication. It's not respectful for us to spread rumors and falsehoods about our leaders, even through something as thoughtless as a mass-forwarded e-mail. Sooner or later, all of us are going to be under a ruler we don't like, but we should never let that distaste drive us to sin.

Of course, not all of our obligations are to government. We are also responsible for **OUR WORK**. Paul emphasizes this in Ephesians 6:5-7. Remember, friends, this text was originally written to slaves, men and women who may not have received anything beyond food and board for the work they did. If God didn't want Christians in that situation to slack, He doesn't want us to slack either. One of the characters in the comic strip "Dilbert" is a bald engineer named Wally, who will use every trick he can think of to avoid actually doing work. All of us can think of people like Wally whom we've known, and we must take care that we don't head that way ourselves. This is particularly true if we have a job where we don't work under direct supervision, and we think our bosses have no idea how much we goof off. Usually, they have a much better idea than we think they do, and it comes back to bite us. Even if that's not true, even if we can get away with all kinds of things while they're not watching, the One who is always watching is the Lord.