

The Loss of Responsibility

by Johan D. Tangelder

Have those "not responsible" signs ever troubled you? You park your car in some high-priced parking lot and a sign proclaims that the management is "not responsible" for any items stolen from your vehicle.

A teacher holds his students responsible for handing in their term papers on time. A father asks his son to cut the lawn. The son has the responsibility to carry out the request. He is now accountable for whether the lawn does or does not get mowed. A family member assumes responsibility for arranging the annual family reunion. We speak in terms of the responsible citizen, the responsible society, the responsibilities of our office. We are called to think and act responsibly.

But what is responsibility, to whom are we responsible, and for what?

A responsible person is someone who does not only take responsibility for himself, but also and especially for his neighbor and for society. In his monumental work *Modern Times: A History of the World from the 1920s to the 1990s*, Paul Johnson observes that the nineteenth century saw the climax of the philosophy of personal responsibility - "the notion that each of us is individually accountable for our actions – which was the joint heritage of Judeo-Christianity and the classical world." But if they were so focused on responsibility back then, how do we understand the loss of responsibility in our time?

The reasons are complex.

The worship of a new god

The loss of responsibility is the direct consequence of the loss of faith. The Bible outlines the moral standards for which we are held accountable, "You shall do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God" (Deut. 12:28). But when the God of the Bible is denied, human existence loses its anchor. Then appeals to the law of God no longer matter.

Since people are religious by nature, they invent new gods to fill the void. One of the most powerful new gods is the god called "Self." The "Self" is now the lawgiver, his own standard of morality. The individual is now the final judge of what is right and wrong. The norms of the community bind him insofar as he consents to them. The notion of personal autonomy and the quest for self-fulfillment are then considered sacred. Writer and philosopher Ayn Rand boldly proclaimed the idolatrous nature of our modern culture. "I see the face of god, and I raise this god over the earth, this god whom men have sought since man came into being, this god who will grant them joy and peace and pride. This god, this one word: 'I.'"

The worship of the god "Self" has produced a society that cherishes the individual above everything else. The current worldview is profoundly self-centered and self-absorbed. Rand declares that each person must be free from any law or anything that limits the full expression of the individual self. In other words, the individual is totally self-sufficient. The individual does not recognize a transcendent source for values and

morality. He has lost his hold on the sense that there is a moral order independent of his choices and wishes. He does whatever is right in his own eyes. If God is not feared, then nothing at all can be taken for granted - and absolutely everything can be permitted. There is nothing to hold him back from the path of self-destruction. This new god exacts a great price: AIDS, kids who have kids, the vanishing father, child poverty etc. Charles Colson summarizes the social results of this chilling truth as "a new dark age." He adds, "Having elevated the individual as the measure of all things, modern men and women are guided solely by their own dark passions; they have nothing above themselves to respect or obey, no principle to live or die for; personal advancement, personal feelings, and personal autonomy are the only shrines at which they worship."

Victimhood

Since the revelation of accounting frauds, lack of business ethics and greed by American CEO's, there is endless talk about the need for personal responsibility and ethical behavior in a civil society. But all the talk about taking responsibility for one's actions will remain empty rhetoric as long as the god "Self" remains enthroned. Ingenious excuses are used to avoid responsibility. For instance, some people reach for their horoscope - not to find out primarily something about their future - but because they want to be guided by the stars. When the stars allegedly determine one's course for life then he exempts himself from any responsibility for his decisions and actions. Whatever happens to him is not his fault as his fate is controlled by the stars.

A new and costly excuse for refusing to take responsibility for one's actions is to sue for harm done by addiction to smoking or overeating. Addiction was once upon a time something you did to yourself. You drank too much. You ate too much, smoked too much. But now fast food companies have been sued for causing obesity. This is a real twist in societal behavior. Many wrap themselves in a cloak of victimhood. They say, "I am blameless. Someone else owes me big for what happened to me. It is everything, except me. I am a victim who is entitled to a financial settlement based on the accumulated injuries inflicted by an uncaring society." Consequently, suing has become a North American cash industry. Millions earn fat paychecks by suing for damages, by representing victims, interviewing victims, counseling victims. "If you have experienced personal injury, you may be entitled to compensation," lawyers assure the public on TV.

But victimhood is not new on the scene. It has its origins in the very beginning of mankind's history. In the Garden of Eden Eve claimed she was a victim. She could not be held responsible for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Adam was the second victim. He blamed God and Eve. "The woman you put here with me - she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Adam and Eve have a long line of descendants. There are abundant illustrations which underscore this fact. The late German theologian Helmut Thielicke related a conversation which took place between a journalist and a young prisoner he was visiting in jail.

"Why are you really here?"

The young man hesitated a bit. "I entered a store."

"Get much?"

"Forty-five dollars," he answered.

"How long did you get for it?"

"Nine-months."

After a brief pause the journalist asked, "Is it worth it?"

"What's the use of this bosh about whether it's worth it; I can't help it."

"Aha," said the journalist, "so you are innocent?"

"No, not innocent, but neurotic."

The young man gave basically the answer we are all inclined to give. It is fate, or my gene, my nerves, my upbringing, or my unfortunate childhood. I didn't choose my parents. One of the saddest stories I read about victimhood took place in April of 1989. A group of boys between the ages of fourteen and seventeen raped, beat, and stabbed a young woman who had been jogging through New York's Central Park. The boys were not members of a gang but middle class youths. Their attitude toward the victim and their crime was unimaginably inhuman. Even after their arrest, one of the assailants said of the victim, "She was nothing." What was the reaction of the secular mind set? Society was blamed for infecting the boys with the desire to commit such a horrible deed. Charles Colson quotes an "expert." Forensic psychologist Shawn Johnston explained the boys were "damaged...in pain inside. Acting out their pain on innocent victims." But such evil acts are the responsibility of those who perpetrate them. The Bible clearly states that everyone is responsible for his actions. Furthermore, we are by nature inclined to do evil. We cannot shift the blame on others or make up excuses for boys who committed a horrendous crime. No one is inherently good. Every person, by nature, possesses a sinful disposition. "The heart is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick; Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Who is my neighbor?

It is a grave error to think one can live independently of others or find scapegoats for one's misfortunes or evil actions. Any attempt to live as though one is alone or to blame others is the denial of one's responsibility. When the "Self" becomes one's idol, he has not only become estranged from God but also from his neighbors. Personal responsibility implies interaction within a community - to be in solidarity with it. The Lord's command still is "to love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). To love your neighbor means not to be able to think of oneself in isolation of others but only in relation to others.

Who is our neighbor? The person next door, the starving peasant in a drought-stricken African country, the homeless in our city? How do we view our neighbor? Do we look at him from the point of view that says, "My neighbor will have to look out for himself; nobody ever helped me?" Or the point of view that says, "If my neighbor cannot cope with himself or his marriage or his finances, then let him go to the local welfare agency or his member of parliament?" Christians accept responsibility for the sake of the Lord. They must accept the consequences of their profession of faith. They have to say, "We are responsible for our actions, to live out the Christian virtues." We accept responsibility out of gratitude for all that the Lord has done for our salvation. "We do good because Christ by His Spirit is also renewing us to be like Himself, so that in all our

living we may show that we are thankful to God for all that he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us" (Lord's Day 32: Q&A 86).

Christians see people differently from the way we did before. We shall have to see them as Jesus saw them. Then we shall not ask, "Who is my neighbor?" but "To whom can I be a neighbor?" No Christian can fail to hear the Bible's call to positive action: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (Eccl.9:10). We are called to shoulder our responsibility for the poor, the homeless, the unborn, the persecuted fellow Christians, those suffering from racial prejudice. But we cannot undertake greater obligations for others if we cannot be exact in small obligations at home. The apostle Paul noted, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:5).

Accountable to God

Responsible action is always subject to obligation. The question is: To whom are we responsible? Secular humanists cannot provide an adequate answer. They assume that the physical universe is self-contained and does not require something beyond itself to explain its own existence. But in their rejection of the Triune God they have removed the basis for moral absolutes. When the Bible is meaningless and truth is one's personal opinion then there is nowhere to stand from which to judge whether something is true or false. If there is no law above society then society cannot be judged. If there is nothing in the universe that's higher than human beings, then what is the standard for morality? Well it's a matter of opinion.

Without absolutes, nothing is absolutely bad or deplorable. No one is then able to give concrete moral guidance, to provide a reliable guide to show what is right and honorable. Consequently, there is no longer any moral standard that applies across cultures. All belief systems are accepted as valid, no belief is absolutely true, diversity is something to be celebrated. Public opinion sets the standards. And "politically correct" politicians lead the way by studiously avoiding making moral judgments, by denying the principle of cause and effect, that what you reap you sow. Laws have swept away the moral inhibition on couples living together outside of marriage. The Christian definition of the family is now considered valid for the Christian community, not for the gay community. In other words, responsibility has become secularized, separated from the idea of judgment and a final account to God.

But responsibility is originally a Christian term. The concept of responsibility is unintelligible apart from God. The universe is His possession because He created it; He has the right over it. He has the full authority for providing moral standards for our good. We are not merely accountable to human authority but to God, our Creator, whose character provides an absolute standard of good, purity, and justice. He has the full right as Creator to set boundaries which may not be transgressed. Our actions are limited by these definite boundaries. They cannot be overstepped. God has set the standards for which we are responsible and by which we are measured. They are explained in His law as revealed in Scripture. It tells man what is good and what God requires of him. "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Disregard for God's law can give rise only to irresponsibility. Some day all of us have to give an account for

our sins of commission and omission. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). God holds us responsible for our actions. No one can shrug off sin and call it fate or shift the blame on others or on his genes or on his upbringing. Before God no one can talk himself out of a predicament for which he is responsible. He must take responsibility himself. Scripture clearly teaches that unless a sinner acknowledges his responsibility for his sin and repents, he cannot be forgiven by God through Jesus Christ (Cf. Acts 3:19).