



The King's Highway

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WHEN RESPONSIBILITY CLOSES IN

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"So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12).

In our day, as in Paul's day, it is so much easier to sit in judgment on other people than to sit in judgment on ourselves. Furthermore, it has always been fatally easy for us to forget that each of us and all of us must eventually stand or fall before a higher tribunal than man's. "All of us," reads the Moffatt New Testament, "have to stand before the tribunal of God . . . Each of us then will have to answer for himself to God."

This closing in of responsibility to the point where it becomes urgently and inescapably personal is a note that needs to be struck again in our day.

There has been, during the last generations, a progressive fading out of the sense of individual responsibility. If I fail, society is to blame. If there is help to be given, let the government give it. So the feeling has grown that personal accountability does not count for much.

I.

For one thing, a good deal that has called itself modern education has been at fault. Go back a few years, and you have science teaching men that the universe is a mindless machine in which such spiritual factors as the soul, or sin, or free will, or even God, simply did not exist outside of the imagination of the pious. It was the day of the scientific doctrine of determinism. It meant, in effect, that freedom was an illusion and fate was all. Where is personal responsibility in a world system such as that?

Go back a few years, and you have psychology teaching our young people that human behaviour has nothing to do with so-called moral principles or concepts. Man's behaviour is essentially an animal response to animal stimuli, since man, after all, is only an animal with a somewhat more sensitive organism than the animal beneath him. Therefore, said this school of psychology, what you want to do is right; what you do not want to do is wrong. Men are not bad because they have bad hearts; they are bad (or rather unfortunate) because they have bad glands.

In my college days that was the one-tenth of truth that was being dished out for the whole truth. The manner in which it was done, moreover, made it sheer moral poison for those who fell for it. Those were the days when Ogden Nash might have been crowned the poet laureate of this half-baked philosophy of life. Nash wrote the couplet:

"Why did the Lord give us agility,

If not to escape the responsibility?"

It would be hard to find two lines that look with more leering eyes upon all the sacred things of life. It reflects the mood of the modern individual who, when told by a friend that he was acting like a fool, came back with the shoulder-shrugging reply, "Well, if that is what I am, I cannot help it. That is the way fate made me."

Or again, one is bound to say that there are those who shirk individual responsibility by falling into the snares of self-pity. They waste perfectly good time feeling sorry for themselves either because of their bad ancestry or their ugly environment. No sane person denies the influence of heredity, but a lot of people have talked insanely about some fancied hereditary handicap of theirs. A young person said, "I don't like classical music, but why should I? My father and my grandfather never did." We're often just about as shallow as that when we talk about heredity.

So, too, with circumstances—we can cry over them or we can climb over them. The choice is up to us. An elderly man recently said to a young minister, "I'm thankful I'm not as young as you are; I should hate to live much longer in this kind of a world." There's something pathetic about that. The evil of the world is admittedly tragic. Yet the whole mass of its evil is not great enough or powerful enough to crush or contaminate one single soul that flings itself boldly and believingly on God and forges ahead.

Responsible living—that's what God has always asked of us. And that, let be added, is what He is going to ask of us when we stand before Him to be judged. It is not living that we need to fear. What we need to beware of is the effort, conscious or unconscious, to shrug off our personal responsibility for taking this thing called living and doing something fine with it.

II.

Consider, in the next place, some of the expressions of personal responsibility to which attention is called in our context.

The first fact we face is that each of us is responsible for a cultivated conscience. It is the adjective that is important: the Christian cultivation of the conscience is what Paul wants these early Christians to know. One man was asked if he had a "good conscience." His cynical reply was: "I should say so—as good as new; it has never been used." It was only a quip, perhaps, and intended as a half-truth, but it points up a serious phase of our living: conscience as such is not to be trusted; it must be an informed and healthy conscience.

See now how the apostle Paul deals with this question. In the Christian community in Rome, as in others among Paul's churches,

there were those who had been converted to Christ out of Judaism. The solution which Paul proposed was a more enlightened conscience on both sides. The enlightenment was to take two forms: a recognition of the Christian principle of liberty and a recognition of the Christian principle of responsibility.

What about the liberty? "Let every man be persuaded in his own mind." There you have it. But in fairness to Paul you want to be clear as to the sort of liberty he is commending. This is the same Paul who writes to the Galatian Christians, saying, "Though we, or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you . . . let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). Why does he not say to the Galatians, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind?" Because there he is discussing something entirely different. There it is a question of Christ as the Son of God and the Cross of Christ as the essential way of salvation. A man has no liberty to deny that, cries the Apostle, and call himself a Christian.

But here in the Roman church the problems that are vexing and straining the brotherhood have nothing to do with basic doctrines of the faith or fundamental Christian morals. They are rather the external questions of form and custom. They call for the exercise of Christian liberty by both parties.

Ah, that is fine, you say. That's the kind of conscience I believe in—one that is elastic on these secondary matters. Very well, says Paul, but combined with this principle of liberty is the sense of responsibility. You've got to build that into your conscience too.

God will hold you responsible for a harsh and condemning criticism of those whom you call narrow. After all, says Paul, "to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." If he feels that smoking, for example, is unclean, while you feel that it is not, you are to hold him, not in contempt, but in respect.

On the other hand he is under the same obligation toward you, assuming of course that there are the essential evidences of your faith in Christ and your devotedness to Him. He is not to judge you unworthy of a place in Christ's church merely because of a difference of this kind.

Splendid, says someone, that should end the matter. Oh, no, says Paul, it does not end the matter at all. The principle of responsibility holds on us a still tighter rein. The enlightened Christian conscience, he now shows, must include a concern for the influence that my broader views and practices may have upon others in the brotherhood of the church. In other words, there are limits on my Christian liberty which I voluntarily accept for the sake of others. And here is Paul's way of stating

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