

# Clarifying Responsibility

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One of the most important questions in life is, "Who is responsible for what?" As you deal with this question in ministry, you will tend to encounter three classes of people.

The first group is made up of people who are *irresponsible*. They fail to recognize and shoulder their God-given responsibilities. Next, will encounter those who are *overly responsible*. These people take responsibility for things that God has not assigned or equipped them to do. The third class of people is probably the largest of the three. These people are *genuinely confused* about which things a their God-given jobs and which things they can entrust to him. Sometime they are mini-messiahs, trying to do things that only God can do. At other times, they ask God to take care of responsibilities he has clearly placed on them. All three groups need to understand their responsibilities in order to apply change meaningfully to their daily lives.

Figure 13.1 is a simple tool for clarifying responsibility. Let's start with the inner circle, the Circle of Responsibility. This circle represents a particular person's biblical job description. These are the things that God, in his Word, calls this person to do in his present situation and relationships. A man, for example, needs a clear sense of what God calls him to do as a husband, father, neighbor, relative, son, worker, and member of the body of Christ. God is calling him to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Christ (Luke 9:23-25), and no longer live for himself, but for the Lord (2 Cor. 5:14-15). The response of faith in this case is obedience. Our job is to help this man find specific ways to respond, in the obedience of faith, to this call to discipleship.

In this circle, we ask the person to list what he thinks are his God assigned duties in each role God has given him (as a father, employee, etc.) Next, we help him examine his list in light of Scripture to discover whether the things he listed really are what God has call him to do. Often there are discrepancies between our lists and GOD'S. When we see this, we can gain a better sense of what God actually expects of us—and will enable us to do by his grace.

The outer circle, the Circle of Concern, represents those things that are important to a person (the love of a spouse, a child's salvation), yet beyond his ability to bring about. Therefore, they are not his responsibility. Here we are calling a person to recognize his limits and to remember God, who is faithful to his promises (Ps. 145:13) and sovereign over all things (Acts 17:24-28). The response of faith in this case is to entrust these matters to God in prayer.

People confuse these circles in two main ways. First they allow the inner circle to expand into the outer circle, so that they function as mini-messiahs, trying to do what only God can do. Second, they the inner circle and, under the guise of trusting God, neglect what God calls them to do. We want to help them avoid both pitfalls.

Imagine how helpful this exercise would be for Sharon, who has clearly been very confused about the issue of responsibility. Some-times she has acted as if she were lord, master, and messiah, attempting to do what only God can do (expanding her Circle of Responsibility inappropriately). At other times she has been unbiblically passive, waiting for God to do the very things he has clearly assigned to her (shrinking her Circle of Responsibility inappropriately). Sharon would greatly benefit from having the issue of responsibility clarified for her.

If Sharon lives as a mini-messiah (with too large a Circle of Responsibility), there will be two negative effects. First, since she is trying to do God's job, she will experience discouragement, frustration, and failure. After all, she is not qualified! Second, because she is focusing on God's job, she will tend to leave undone the things that in his Word, has given her to carry out. Sharon has experienced problems as she has sought to make changes in her marriage.

As another example, Alicia is concerned about her teenage son. He is increasingly rebellious, irresponsible, unkind, and selfish, missing more school than he is attending. Alicia has told Matt and her close friends that her goal is to "turn Matt into a responsible Christian if it is the last thing I ever do." This is the goal of a mini-messiah, although Alicia doesn't realize it. She has improperly expanded her Circle of Responsibility to cover things that belong in her Circle of Concern. Though she can do certain things to help, challenge, discipline, and encourage Matt (things that are within her Circle of Responsibility), she cannot control Matt's heart (a matter that belongs in her Circle of Concern). Only God can do that. Alicia is taking God's job as her own and she will experience failure and frustration as a result.

Having too small an inner circle — attempting to give back to God what he has called me to do —will have two negative results as well.

First, I will waste time and prayer if I wait for God to do something he has assigned me to do. I will think God has failed me when, in fact, I have failed him! If overly responsible people are mini-messiahs, people who shrink their inner circle are "spiritual vacationers." They have abandoned their God-assigned workplace and are lounging around, expecting him to do their job. God will empower me to do the things he has called me to do, but he will not do them for me. Therefore, I will be waiting for something I will not receive. And as I am waiting, the second negative result will surface: things will worsen because of what I have left undone.

What would happen, for example, if Alicia had the opposite reaction to Matt's rebellion and made her Circle of Responsibility too small? What if Alicia said to her friends, "I've decided to let go and let God deal with Matt. I can't parent him anymore; God is just going to have to do a miracle." It is true that only God can change Matt's heart, but it is also true that God positions and uses people to accomplish his miraculous plan. He has given Matt a mother because Matt needs a mother, and because he intends to bring his truth to bear on Matt through her. Alicia should daily entrust Matt to the

Lord, while she continues to do the things God has called her to do as a parent. God wants Alicia to live out an active, obedient trust, not a passive one.

A passive response may appear to be the “spiritual” thing to do, but it is just as unbiblical as living like a mini-messiah . It is the response people often make when facing a broken relationship. Let’s say that Dave knows that he has a broken relationship with his friend Alec. Alec hardly calls any more and hasn't asked for Dave to pray for him, as he used to, in months. Dave knows that their problems go back to a public disagreement he had with Alec a year ago. Dave says that he has "dealt with it in his heart" and is now waiting for God to restore the relationship. That response reveals that Dave's Circle of Responsibility is too small. The Bible clearly calls him to take steps to be reconciled to Alec (Matt. 5:23-24).

Many Christians also take a "passive trust" approach to seeking guidance and direction from the Lord. They think that knowing God's will comes as God reveals his secret plan to them; then they will know what to do. But guidance is really a matter of obedient, active trust. I examine the options before me using the principles, themes, and perspectives of Scripture. Then, to the best of my knowledge and ability, I apply biblical wisdom and make a decision. My decision is not based on reading God's mind, but on things he has clearly revealed in his Word. As I step forward, I entrust myself to the Lord, knowing that he rules over everything and will place me where he wants me. This is the biblical model of guidance. Too many people have their "Christian divining rods" out in hopes of discovering the secret will of God. Meanwhile, the Bible in their hands is unopened—the thing God has said will be a "lamp to their feet and a light to their path"!

## **TRUST AND OBEY**

The Christian life can really be boiled down to two words: trust and obey. I must always entrust the things that are out of my control to God (Circle of Concern), and I must always be faithful to obey his clear and specific commands (Circle of Responsibility). Romans 12:14-21 is a wonderful passage to use to explain this "trust and obey" lifestyle.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the LORD.

On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

What is powerful about this passage is that it lays out the "trust and obey" lifestyle in the context of mistreatment. God clearly explains our duties in the face of wrong treatment:

- Bless those who persecute you (v. 14).
- Be tender and compassionate (v. 15).
- Commit to living in harmony (v. 16).
- Do not be proud (v. 16).
- As far as you can, live at peace with everyone (v. 19).
- Meet your enemy's need (v. 20).
- Overcome evil with good (v. 21).

In making my responsibilities under mistreatment clear, Paul also makes it clear that there are things that I must not take as my responsibility. For example, I must not retaliate or seek revenge. These are things that only God has the right and the power to do. They are, in fact, things he has promised to do. I must not load them onto my shoulders.

At the same time, it is wrong to be passive in the face of mistreatment, waiting around for God to do something. God calls us to be obediently active, looking for ways to do good, make peace, and meet needs. In the process, we continue to entrust the person who has wronged us to God's just and merciful hands. In short, we must do what God has called us to do in a spirit of joyful submission, and, in a spirit of humble trust, let God do what he alone can do.

Few areas are more confusing to people than the area of personal responsibility. They need practical clarity to help them through the process of change. We can help them first by providing a clear sense of direction as we think biblically about God's agenda. Second, we can help by clarifying the issue of responsibility and applying the "trust and obey" lifestyle to their daily situations and relationships.

Holding onto God's grace and glory is the only way to deal with the disappointment and loss that is so much a part of life. As we hold these themes before people, we not only participate in God's kingdom work of lasting change, we also introduce them to the Person who offers the highest human satisfaction that can be found.