

Responsibility

Previewing the Issue

Everywhere you look today you can see it. You see it at schools; you see it in the workplace; you even see it in the church. It's called the Blame Game. It always starts the same way. Something goes wrong. Sometimes it's a minor incident; sometimes it's a more significant one. In either case, once the mistake is made, the game begins.

The object of the game is to avoid taking responsibility for the mistake. You're allowed to shift the responsibility, skirt the responsibility, even ignore the responsibility. But at no time are you allowed to take the responsibility. You can blame the authorities or you can blame TV. You can blame others or you can blame your upbringing. You can blame just about anyone or anything you want, so long as you don't have to take responsibility.

Because of the simplicity of the Blame Game, one would think that children are the only ones playing it. Think again. In the world where we live and work, adults have become quite familiar with this game. From professional athletes to parents, it has become very convenient to shift the responsibility for the situations we find our selves in to others.

Is this the way it's suppose to be? Is this what we should expect of the individuals in our society? Is this what we are to expect of ourselves?

As we examine this concept of responsibility more closely, we are going to find that there are two aspects. One is the issue of follow through. That is, doing what we say we are going to do. A conscientious person has learned that in order to be counted on, one must exhibit a measure of dependability. The other aspect of responsibility is owning up to the consequences of one's actions. A responsible person will recognized the effects of the choices and decisions they have made, and will not only take liability for them, but in doing so will learn and grow from them.

Probing the Scriptures

The early pages of the Bible are filled with fascinating accounts, stories that bring to life the spirit and nature of the human race. What we find in these accounts is sometimes troubling, and other times heroic. One such narrative takes place in the Book of Genesis.

God's chosen nation (Israel) was a young nation at the time, only consisting of one family. Jacob (also known as Israel) had twelve sons. These twelve sons and their father and sisters were all there was of this fledgling nation.

Ten of the twelve brothers had become jealous of their brother Joseph. They sold him as a slave, and then told their father that he had been devoured by wild game.

Joseph would go on to become the second highest ranking official in all of Egypt. His path would cross his brothers again when famine would strike and they would have to travel to Egypt for food. Let's pick up the story at this point.

When Jacob learned that there was food in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you sit around here and look at one another? I've heard that there is food in Egypt. Go down there and buy some so that we can survive and not starve to death."

Ten of Joseph's brothers went down to Egypt to get food. Jacob didn't send Joseph's brother Benjamin with them; he was afraid that something bad might happen to him. So Israel's sons joined everyone else that was going to Egypt to buy food, for Canaan, too, was hit hard by the famine.

Responsibility

Joseph was running the country; he was the one who gave out rations to all the people. When Joseph's brothers arrived, they treated him with honor, bowing to him. Joseph recognized them immediately, but treated them as strangers and spoke roughly to them.

He said, "Where do you come from?"

"From Canaan," they said. "We've come to buy food."

Joseph knew who they were, but they didn't know who he was.

Joseph said, "You're spies. You've come to look for our weak spots."

"No, master," they said. "We've only come to buy food. We're all the sons of the same man; we're honest men; we'd never think of spying."

He said, "No. You're spies. You've come to look for our weak spots."

They said, "There were twelve of us brothers—sons of the same father in the country of Canaan. The youngest is with our father, and one is no more."

Then he threw them into jail for three days.

On the third day, Joseph spoke to them. "Do this and you'll live. I'm a God-fearing man. If you're as honest as you say you are, one of your brothers will stay here in jail while the rest of you take the food back to your hungry families. But you have to bring your youngest brother back to me, confirming the truth of your speech—and not one of you will die." They agreed.

Joseph took Simeon and had him tied up, making a prisoner of him while they all watched. Then Joseph ordered that their sacks be filled with grain, that their money be put back in each sack, and that they be given rations for the road. That was all done for them. They loaded their food supplies on their donkeys and set off.

When they got back to their father Jacob, back in the land of Canaan, they told him everything that had happened, saying, "The man who runs the country spoke to us roughly and accused us of being spies. We told him, 'We are honest men and in no way spies. There were twelve of us brothers, sons of one father; one is gone and the youngest is with our father in Canaan.'

"But the master of the country said, 'Leave one of your brothers with me, take food for your starving families, and go. Bring your youngest brother back to me, proving that you're honest men and not spies. And then I'll give your brother back to you and you'll be free to come and go in this country.' "

The famine got worse. When they had eaten all the food they had brought back from Egypt, their father said, "Go back and get some more food."

But Judah said, "The man warned us most emphatically, 'You won't so much as see my face if you don't have your brother with you.' If you're ready to release our brother to go with us, we'll go down and get you food. But if you're not ready, we aren't going. What would be the use? The man told us, 'You won't so much as see my face if you don't have your brother with you.' "

Israel said, "Why are you making my life so difficult! Why did you ever tell the man you had another brother?"

Responsibility

Judah pushed his father Israel. “Let the boy go; I’ll take charge of him. Let us go and be on our way—if we don’t get going, we’re all going to starve to death—we and you and our children too! I’ll take full responsibility for his safety; it’s my life on the line for his. If I don’t bring him back safe and sound, I’m the guilty one; I’ll take all the blame. If we had gone ahead in the first place instead of procrastinating like this, we could have been there and back twice over.”

Their father Israel gave in. “If it has to be, it has to be. Go back to the man. And may The Strong God give you grace in that man’s eyes so that he’ll send back your other brother along with Benjamin. For me, nothing’s left; I’ve lost everything.”

- ☐ The brothers of Joseph did an evil thing in selling their brother into slavery. Do you see the irony in the above story as it is told in Genesis. What is it?

- ☐ Who was responsible for Joseph winding up in Egypt? What were the circumstances surrounding his captivity there?

- ☐ What is Joseph’s attitude towards his brothers? List some ways this attitude is displayed in his actions.

- ☐ What is Joseph’s brothers’ attitude towards him?

- ☐ When the brothers return to their father, who steps up and takes responsibility? Do you find this admirable, foolish, hasty, noble? Why?

- ☐ How well do you accept the consequences of your actions?

Responsibility

Perusing other Pages

Consider this story told by Bernard L. Brown, Jr., president of the Kennestone Regional Health Care System in the state of Georgia.

Brown once worked in a hospital where a patient knocked over a cup of water, which spilled on the floor beside the patient's bed. The patient was afraid he might slip on the water if he got out of the bed, so he asked a nurse's aide to mop it up. The patient didn't know it, but the hospital policy said that small spills were the responsibility of the nurse's aides while large spills were to be mopped up by the hospital's housekeeping group.

The nurse's aide decided the spill was a large one and she called the housekeeping department. A housekeeper arrived and declared the spill a small one. An argument followed.

"It's not my responsibility," said the nurse's aide, "because it's a large puddle." The housekeeper did not agree. "Well, it's not mine," she said, "the puddle is too small."

The exasperated patient listened for a time, then took a pitcher of water from his night table and poured the whole thing on the floor. "Is that a big enough puddle now for you two to decide?" he asked. It was, and that was the end of the argument.

Bits & Pieces, September 16, 1993, p. 22-24.

Responsibility

From the way my parents were acting just days before my tenth birthday, I thought for sure that I would finally get a horse of my own. I spent hours dreaming of riding across the fields, hand feeding it apples and carrots in the barn, and the fancy saddle that would make all my friends jealous. I squealed with excitement when my father walked in to my party and announced that he had a special gift for his birthday girl. Then my heart sank as he opened his cupped hands and presented me with a baby chick. My saddle dreams were dashed. Even though the disappointment was evident on my face, he smiled and handed me the chick. "It's all yours. I think you're ready to take care of this chick by yourself."

That chick turned out to be harder to raise than I thought. I had to mend all the small holes in the chicken yard fence, feed her and make sure she had fresh water. Some days the weather seemed too bad to have to trudge out to the chicken coop, but my father would remind me that my chicken was relying on me for its care and out the door I would go.

My eleventh birthday rolled around without anticipation. I had given up on my dream for a horse. As I walked into the kitchen that morning, my father pointed toward a large gift-wrapped box by the back door. Tearing open the wrapper, I found a beautiful saddle with a note that read, "Take this to your new friend in the barn, you've earned her."

Processing Together

☐ Have you ever taken the blame for something that was not your fault?

Responsibility

☐ Have you ever seen someone else take the blame for something that you did?

☐ What do you believe to be some of the “keys” to taking responsibility for your actions?

☐ What are some ways that people today “back out of” responsibility?

As a group, lets resume the story of Joseph and his brothers. Spend some time recapping what you worked on earlier in the week. We will pick up the story with Joseph’s brothers returning to Egypt.

The men took the gifts, double the money, and Benjamin. They lost no time in getting to Egypt and meeting Joseph. When Joseph saw that they had Benjamin with them, he told his house steward, “Take these men into the house and make them at home. Butcher an animal and prepare a meal; these men are going to eat with me at noon.”

The steward did what Joseph had said and took them inside. He presented Simeon to them, then took them inside Joseph’s house and made them comfortable—gave them water to wash their feet and saw to the feeding of their donkeys. The brothers spread out their gifts as they waited for Joseph to show up at noon—they had been told that they were to have dinner with him.

When Joseph got home, they presented him with the gifts they had brought and bowed respectfully before him.

Joseph welcomed them and said, “And your old father whom you mentioned to me, how is he? Is he still alive?”

They said, “Yes—your servant our father is quite well, very much alive.” And they again bowed respectfully before him.

Then Joseph picked out his brother Benjamin, his own mother’s son. He asked, “And is this your youngest brother that you told me about?” Then he said, “God be gracious to you, my son.”

Deeply moved on seeing his brother and about to burst into tears, Joseph hurried out into another room and had a good cry. Then he washed his face, got a grip on himself, and said, “Let’s eat.”

Joseph was served at his private table, the brothers off by themselves and the Egyptians off by themselves (Egyptians won’t eat at the same table with Hebrews; it’s repulsive to them). The brothers were seated facing Joseph, arranged in order of their age, from the oldest to the youngest. They looked at one another wide-eyed, wondering what would happen next. When the brothers’ plates were served from Joseph’s table, Benjamin’s plate came piled high, far more so than his brothers. And so the brothers feasted with Joseph, drinking freely.

Responsibility

Joseph ordered his house steward: “Fill the men’s bags with food—all they can carry—and replace each one’s money at the top of the bag. Then put my chalice, my silver chalice, in the top of the bag of the youngest, along with the money for his food.” He did as Joseph ordered.

At break of day the men were sent off with their donkeys. They were barely out of the city when Joseph said to his house steward, “Run after them. When you catch up with them, say, ‘Why did you pay me back evil for good? This is the chalice my master drinks from; he also uses it for divination. This is outrageous!’ ”

He caught up with them and repeated all this word for word.

They said, “What is my master talking about? We would never do anything like that! Why, the money we found in our bags earlier, we brought back all the way from Canaan—do you think we’d turn right around and steal it back from your master? If that chalice is found on any of us, he’ll die; and the rest of us will be your master’s slaves.”

The steward said, “Very well then, but we won’t go that far. Whoever is found with the chalice will be my slave; the rest of you can go free.”

They outdid each other in putting their bags on the ground and opening them up for inspection. The steward searched their bags, going from oldest to youngest. The chalice showed up in Benjamin’s bag.

They ripped their clothes in despair, loaded up their donkeys, and went back to the city. Joseph was still at home when Judah and his brothers got back. They threw themselves down on the ground in front of him.

Joseph accused them: “How can you have done this? You have to know that a man in my position would have discovered this.”

Judah as spokesman for the brothers said, “What can we say, master? What is there to say? How can we prove our innocence? God is behind this, exposing how bad we are. We stand guilty before you and ready to be your slaves—we’re all in this together, the rest of us as guilty as the one with the chalice.”

“I’d never do that to you,” said Joseph. “Only the one involved with the chalice will be my slave. The rest of you are free to go back to your father.”

Judah came forward. He said, “Please, master; can I say just one thing to you? Don’t get angry. Don’t think I’m presumptuous—you’re the same as Pharaoh as far as I’m concerned. You, master, asked us, ‘Do you have a father and a brother?’ And we answered honestly, ‘We have a father who is old and a younger brother who was born to him in his old age. His brother is dead and he is the only son left from that mother. And his father loves him more than anything.’

“Then you told us, ‘Bring him down here so I can see him.’ We told you, master, that it was impossible: ‘The boy can’t leave his father; if he leaves, his father will die.’

“And then you said, ‘If your youngest brother doesn’t come with you, you won’t be allowed to see me.’

“When we returned to our father, we told him everything you said to us. So when our father said, ‘Go back and buy some more food,’ we told him flatly, ‘We can’t. The only way we can go back is if our youngest brother is with us. We aren’t allowed to even see the man if our youngest brother doesn’t come with us.’

Responsibility

“Your servant, my father, told us, ‘You know very well that my wife gave me two sons. One turned up missing. I concluded that he’d been ripped to pieces. I’ve never seen him since. If you now go and take this one and something bad happens to him, you’ll put my old gray, grieving head in the grave for sure.’

“And now, can’t you see that if I show up before your servant, my father, without the boy, this son with whom his life is so bound up, the moment he realizes the boy is gone, he’ll die on the spot. He’ll die of grief and we, your servants who are standing here before you, will have killed him. And that’s not all. I got my father to release the boy to show him to you by promising, ‘If I don’t bring him back, I’ll stand condemned before you, Father, all my life.’

“So let me stay here as your slave, not this boy. Let the boy go back with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? Oh, don’t make me go back and watch my father die in grief!”

Joseph couldn’t hold himself in any longer, keeping up a front before all his attendants. He cried out, “Leave! Clear out—everyone leave!” So there was no one with Joseph when he identified himself to his brothers. But his sobbing was so violent that the Egyptians couldn’t help but hear him. The news was soon reported to Pharaoh’s palace.

Joseph spoke to his brothers: “I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?” But his brothers couldn’t say a word. They were speechless—they couldn’t believe what they were hearing and seeing.

“Come closer to me,” Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. “I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don’t feel badly, don’t blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives.

Who “took responsibility” for the actions of the brothers in this encounter?

What was Judah’s promise to his father?

Was he willing to follow through with this promise? In what ways? To what extent?

What would have been the result had Joseph taken Judah up on his offer?

Responsibility

Would you be willing to pay such a price to “keep your word?”

Putting it into Practice

Would people say that you follow through on your word?

Is there something you told someone that you would do but have not done it yet? If so, what is that? Can you do it this week?

Is there a consequence of an action that you are avoiding? If so, what? Would you be willing to pay that consequence?

Is there anything troubling in your life that you are blaming others for? Is it truly their fault? Could any of the responsibility be yours? How could you grow from that?
