



"We seem to be moving steadily in the direction of a society where no one is responsible for what he himself did but we are all responsible for what somebody else did, either in the present or in the past."

—Thomas Sowell

**13-May-11**

## **Responsibility Equals Accountability**

Open a newspaper or magazine, listen to the lyrics of modern music, or watch a television talk show, and we are very likely to see or hear an accusation against parents of irresponsibility, absenteeism, or physical and psychological abuse made by their grown children. Many of these accusations are nothing more than the children's attempts to transfer their own well-deserved guilt to someone else. Too many young adults complain, "I've come to an amazing realization about my parents: They are the source of all my problems, the reason I'm so messed up!"

Notice what this society considers normal and acceptable. Murder someone? Plead insanity. Pregnant with a baby one does not want? Have an abortion. Many people, products of our culture, are determined to avoid responsibility at all costs, even if it means sacrificing their parents—or anyone else, for that matter.

As a nation, we will go to the extent of changing our language to avoid blaming anyone of anything. Instead of fornication or living in [sin](#), we speak

of "cohabitation." Addicts (junkies) have become "substance abusers." Criminals are "offenders," as if they had merely transgressed the bounds of etiquette. Even terrorists are styled as "freedom fighters" or "enemy combatants."

During Ezekiel's time, Israel made a similar grave mistake in their reasoning, concluding that [God](#) was judging the present generation harshly because of the wickedness of their forefathers. They wrongly believed that it made no difference what they did, blaming their parents for all their woes. These people reasoned that they were the unfortunate victims of the ancient law in [Exodus 20:5](#): "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me." These Israelites obviously misunderstood the message of this verse, which teaches that descendants are *affected* by their fathers' sins, not that the children are predestined to make the same mistakes or are being punished for what their forbears did.

Unfortunately, because of their upbringing, children frequently find themselves practicing the same sinful acts as their fathers, and therefore, they receive the same just punishment. However, each person is still individually responsible for his or her own actions.

The Israelites' misunderstanding, which was leading to irresponsibility and fatalism, is expressed by the proverb, "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" ([Ezekiel 18:2](#)). [Jeremiah 31:29](#) records that this proverb was being repeated throughout Judah at this time. The discourse that follows in Ezekiel 18 confounds the flawed reasoning behind this proverb, showing that responsibility equals accountability for one's own actions. God's response to their misconception is flatly summarized in [Ezekiel 18:3](#): "You shall no longer use this proverb in Israel."

The people had come to believe that righteousness and wickedness were hereditary, so there was no reason to change one's ways. God argues, however, that they were free to decide to walk in His ways or not; they were not bound by what their fathers had done. God states the basic principle of judgment for irresponsibility in [Ezekiel 18:4](#): "The soul who sins shall die." His judgment is personal and individual.

Three illustrations of this principle are found in [Ezekiel 18:5-18](#): Verses 5-9 describe a righteous father; verses 10-13, 18 describe an unrighteous son; and verses 14-17 describe a righteous grandson.

In the first illustration ([Ezekiel 18:5-9](#)), God differentiates righteousness from unrighteousness by stating five areas of His law: In the first, the righteous man refrains from involvement in pagan sacrificial meals at the high places and from the idolatry prevalent in Israel. In the second, the righteous man refuses to defile his neighbor's wife ([adultery](#)) or to have relations with a woman during her menstrual period (sexual perversion). In the third, the righteous man does not oppress people through maltreatment and extortion but restores the pledge of a poor person's debt. In the fourth, the righteous man does not steal but feeds and clothes the destitute. In the fifth, the righteous man practices justice among his fellow Israelites and refuses to take interest from them. This list shows that a person's attitude and acts toward others provide a true indication of his [faith](#) toward God.

In the second illustration ([Ezekiel 18:10-13](#), 18), the unrighteous son of the righteous father demonstrates his unrighteousness and lack of faith in a lifestyle opposite that of his father. Whatever his father did in righteousness, the son does not do, and whatever his father refrained from in righteousness, the unrighteous son does. Verse 18 summarizes his wicked deeds: "he cruelly oppressed, robbed his brother by violence, and did what is not good among his people."

The third illustration ([Ezekiel 18:14-17](#)) shows that a righteous son can descend from an unrighteous father. If the son does all the righteous acts of God's law, as his righteous grandfather did, and refuses to follow his wicked father's unrighteous acts, then he would not die because of his father's wickedness but would live.

God repeats and expands the basic principle regarding judgment in [Ezekiel 18:20](#): "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

In other words, responsibility equals accountability for our own actions. This principle is also taught in the New Testament, as, for instance, in [Romans 14:12](#) the apostle Paul writes, "So then each of us shall give account of himself to God." Likewise, the resurrected [Jesus](#) says in [Revelation 2:23](#), "I will give to each one of you according to his works." If we sin as individuals, we will be judged as individuals.

It is a fact that we do suffer from the effects of the sins of our ancestors. Look at the poor health and degenerative diseases around us, as well as what has been done to the earth by those who have gone before us. We can easily see and feel the effects of our forefathers' sins. However, their sins do not predestine or condemn us to repeat what they did. Each individual is responsible for his own actions and will receive personal judgment: "The soul who sins shall die," not the righteous person.

- Martin G. Collins

---

## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[Self-Government and Responsibility \(Part One\)](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

A major distinguishing characteristic of mankind is his free moral agency, presenting him with choices and the right to make decisions. We need free moral agency to be transformed into God's image. The volition to do right has to come from the core of our character or nature. Paradoxically, the way to maximum freedom is to yield to God's way of doing things. Unless one has the Spirit of God, he cannot exercise the necessary internal control to be subject to the government of God. Even though the church is not the government of God (John 18:36; I Corinthians 15:50), we need to respect the ministry as well as lay members, being subject to one another (I Corinthians 11:1). The operation of God's government absolutely depends upon each person governing himself, never going beyond the parameters of the authority God has given him.

---

## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[The Sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility: Part Eleven](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

God's sovereignty and free moral agency set up a seeming paradox. John Ritenbaugh shows just how much choice we have under God's sovereign rule.

---

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G.  
Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email  
Subscriptions page](#).

---