

Man's Inescapable Responsibility

by G.W. North

Man is responsible to God for his actions, regardless of his background or privileges, and must act upon the knowledge he has been given.

Scripture: Romans 2:14

Topics: "Responsibility to God", "Righteousness and Accountability"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes that all individuals, regardless of their background, bear an inescapable responsibility to God, as evidenced by the law written in their hearts and the natural world around them. He outlines four key areas for which all men are accountable: their conscience, God's individual revelations, the testimony of creation, and the joy provided by God. North highlights that while all are responsible, the degree of accountability varies based on the privileges and revelations each person has received. He uses the example of Cornelius to illustrate that even those outside of traditional faith can be righteous in God's eyes if they respond to the light they have. Ultimately, North calls for a reformation in understanding the scope of God's righteousness and the implications of the gospel for all humanity.

Transcript

PAUL, in his Roman letter, is quite clear that, when born into the world, even heathen men show the work of the law written in their hearts and to some degree are able to do things pleasing to God according to nature. He also makes statements which give ground for believing that God shows to every man certain things for which He holds him responsible. These things are apparently invariable but not inviolable in each of us, whether saint or sinner. Speaking of the celestial bodies which God made and set in the heavens for signs and seasons, Paul, quoting from David, says their lines run into all the earth and there is no speech nor language where their voice is not known. So he concludes from this that all men are equally without excuse, and are answerable to God on at least three counts:

- (1) The work of the law written in their hearts to which their own conscience reacts.
- (2) What God has done and shown in them individually.
- (3) The testimony of the heavenly bodies.

Luke in Acts records Paul as saying that God left not Himself without witness among men by supplying food to fill hearts with joy and gladness. So we may add a fourth to the apostle's three counts above

stated.

The witness of these four may have been to a large degree dimmed in some due to the growing depravity of the race, but nevertheless men's unbelief and rejection does not affect the faithfulness of God or the responsibility of the race. But men are not equal and will not be held equally responsible before the Lord. in the day of judgement when God judges the secrets of men by that man Christ Jesus.

Beyond these four basic things, some men, like Noah and Abraham, have had personal visits and instructions from God; others received His plainly written law and were privileged to build a house for Him to live among them on the earth. Still further, some in their generation actually had the incarnate Christ with them and witnessed His life and death and resurrection. Others of us have been privileged to hear the gospel and have received the completed canon of scripture and know the Baptism of the Spirit and have become members of the Church of Christ. In these things all men are not equal and cannot be held equally responsible, but on the other hand those who have had the greater privileges and received the greater revelations also equally share the identical four basic blessings with the whole of mankind. Therefore their responsibility is so much greater than those less-privileged who have been denied these blessings; they will be judged upon that basis. God is just with all men, as well as the justifier of them that believe in Jesus.

We are again indebted to Luke for another insight into apostolic understanding and statement; this time it is Peter's. When speaking to Cornelius he said, 'I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him'. Until that occasion when he had to use the keys of the kingdom to open the door of faith to the gentiles, Peter had thought that except they had previously been proselytised to Judaism it was quite impossible for gentiles to be saved. Unless God had shown him that great vessel full of unclean animals coming down from Him and caught up again into heaven, he would never have found it possible to believe that unregenerate gentiles could work righteousness, but God said that they could. Prior to that he could not believe that gentiles to whom the law had not been given and who had not as yet been privileged to have the gospel preached to them on an official basis, could possibly do things which made them acceptable to God, but they could.

Peter had been wrong; His use of the word 'but' is the plainest proof that he had arrived at new conclusions. He revised his whole thinking as a result of the vision at Joppa and the commandment of God. If he had used the word 'and' instead of 'but', he would have revealed that he had always understood that gentiles could do righteousness and be acceptable to God, even though they had not been proselytised to Judaism and were unregenerate. What a revelation this is! Reading the whole tenth chapter we find that Cornelius was a man of very fine character indeed. The mounting summary of his many virtues is most impressive, and yet he was a heathen, though perhaps he may have been mistaken by many for a Christian. Like the heathen women who gathered for prayer by the river at Philippi, he was not saved, but his heart was toward God.

This word of Peter's is profoundly revelatory, for it also shows the principle of righteousness upon which God Himself acts in His dealings with all men; 'that word ye know', is the basis of all His judgements. How we act upon knowledge imparted, inwrought or revealed to us is the criterion of judgement. Because Cornelius responded properly to what he knew by whatever means he knew it he was accepted of God as being righteous. He had walked in all the light he knew. That did not mean he did not need to be born from above, he did and eventually was. It does mean that he did not have the absolute righteousness of Christ imparted to him and that he did not know the righteousness which is in the law; it also means that he had

the righteousness of a heart that perfectly responded to all he believed and knew. Whether or not he had ceased from all his heathen idolatry we are not told; we do know however that Peter did not challenge him on the ground of knowledge equal to all men but on his advanced knowledge of the word of God in and through Jesus of Nazareth. If he had not responded to that he would have been guilty of Christ-rejection and would presumably have lost all claims to righteousness upon former grounds.

In exactly the same way the Jews (even if they were Hebrews of the Hebrews as was Saul of Tarsus, 'and as touching the righteousness which is in the law perfect'), from the moment they were challenged with the gospel immediately forfeited all claims to justification upon legal grounds of righteousness; if they rejected the gospel they became totally unrighteous. This is why Paul so severely reprimanded Peter at Antioch for compelling gentiles to live as Jews. He had been shown by God that the Jews' religion was now void of righteousness, but through fear of man he had gone back on his revelation.

In the gospel which He has commanded to be preached to all men God has revealed His righteousness according to a higher law than that of Moses. Much of our thinking and therefore our theology and many of our doctrines need reformation. Our preaching has been too severely narrowed by: (1) falsely limiting the purpose of Christ's death to atonement, (2) failing to understand the exceedingly greater truth of redemption; (3) confusing the whole nature and scope of regeneration and (4) inexcusably overlooking the full import of reconciliation; this despite the plainest expositions of these mighty truths in the New Testament scriptures and the many allusions to them in the vast scriptures of the Old Testament revelation.

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