REQUIRING OTHERS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

POSTCARDS FROM CORINTH CHAPTER EXCERPT

Postcards is the Users Guide for personal discipleship. While The Compass provides content for one-on-one discipleship, Postcards tackles the practice, philosophy, and difficult challenges that are a part of discipleship.

Here, for example, is a partial list of the topics covered: Habitual Sin, Authority Issues, Christian Counseling, Fasting, Theological Conflicts, Coaching Through Trials, Challenging to Conferences, Confronting Sin, Ministering Cross-Culturally, The Role of Faith, Difficulties in Sharing the Ministry of the Spirit, Selection, Conflict Resolution, Why Does Leadership Matter, Conducting Basic Follow-up... Postcards contains 47 articles on all critical issues of discipleship.
Chapter Twelve

Deal With It
Requiring others to take responsibility for their choices

Being a mature disciple of Christ includes being responsible for our lives; living in light of eternity, and being good stewards of what God has given us. In discipleship, our disciples take more responsibility for their lives and owning their mission of seeking and saving the lost. It is a turning process from self to Christ, from self to others.

But, there is a tendency for us to short circuit growth and maturity by taking responsibility for what we are not responsible for. We have a responsibility to those we build, but not for them. Helping others to be responsible for their life and mission has more to do with the discipler than the one being discipled.

ALLOWING PEOPLE THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

It was a warm afternoon. The shadows were starting to grow longer. The sharp edges of the rough plastered homes cast zigzag shadows on the pathway. A rich young man made his way down the path seeking an ordinary man who had no home. He was looking for Jesus, an iternant teacher loved by some and loathed by others.

The rich man was a ruler, well known and well connected. He was a person of influence, a potential leader, and an insider to the Pharisees. He was seeking answers to the important questions of life, such as, “What must I do to obtain eternal life?”

The ruler was a good man. He obeyed the laws of man and God and that was his problem. He didn’t realize what a failure he was. In the discussion that followed, Jesus asked him to sell all he had and give the money to the poor. The first commandment is to have no other gods. Giving away his wealth would demonstrate he has no gods, not even money, before God. The young rich ruler was not willing to uphold the first command.

The rich young ruler came to Jesus seeking answers. But what did Jesus really offer him? Jesus said, “Sell all that you possess ... and come follow me.” In Matthew 4:19, Jesus said to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me.” In Matthew 9:9, Jesus says to Matthew the tax collector, “Follow me.” It seems that Jesus was offering the same opportunity to the rich young ruler that he offered to those who would be his intimate disciples.
He offered this man an opportunity not only for eternal life but to be mentored by the Master, to be in His close circle of friends. What an opportunity.

“But when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich.” This potential disciple turned and walked away. Do you know the most amazing thing? Jesus let him walk. The ruler was a man of character, an insider to influential groups. But Jesus let him walk.

I suspect that most of us who seek to build disciples would not have let the rich young man walk away. I would have chased after him. I would have made excuses for him, given him some slack, not been so hard on him or tried to help him understand what he was missing. But we have no record of Jesus doing any of that, and as far as we know, this young man never came back.

Jesus never forced himself on anyone. We see this principle throughout the Bible. In the garden, Adam and Eve were about to lead all mankind into rebellion, and God let them choose. He knew the pain that would ensue from their decision—that death was to come to creation. God respected His creation so much that He allowed them to make their own decision, one that brought pain and suffering to billions of people. God respects the decisions we make. This is not an attempt to debate free will and predestination. My desire is to illustrate that when people want to sin, God does not always stop them.

Jesus respected the rich young ruler’s decision to not follow Him. When we chase after potential disciples, and fail to give them a real choice, we insult them by not respecting the choices they make.

When we coerce others in the discipleship process we actually inhibit their growth. Part of God’s design is that we grow by trial and error. He gives us His law, which is good. I try to keep it but fail. I learn I need a savior. He gives me instructions on how to live. I then choose to disregard God’s ways. This brings pain and suffering and heartbreak into my life. The next time around I might make a better choice.

I remember helping my oldest son Zac to realize that he is responsible for himself. We live in Maine and it was a cold winter day, but not too cold. I think Zac was about three-years-old years old. All three of our sons have always loved playing outside, no matter what the thermometer says. This particular day was no exception. Zac wanted to go outside, but did not want to put his coat on. I told him, “Sure, if that is what you want to do.” He was outside for about all of five minutes before he came running in complaining how cold he was. I knelt on the floor with him and held him close to me to warm his chilly little bones. I agreed with him—it really was cold out there. Then with love and compassion in my heart and voice, I said, “What do you think you could do next time?” Never, and I mean never again has he walked outside and into the cold without his coat. In fact he is more responsible than I am when we go places.

The principle is one Jesus taught and modeled—give people a choice, respect that choice, and allow natural consequences to be implemented. Then show compassion and ask what they could do differently the next time. Our disciples are responsible for their growth, not us. When we step in and take responsibility, we short-circuit God’s plan for maturity.

Just recently I was working on remodeling my wife’s kitchen. When the work goes
well the kitchen is mine, and when it goes poorly it is hers. (Can you see how responsible I really am?) Anyway, the phone rang. It was a former student who I had discipled. He had been making some poor choices concerning alcohol and was paying a heavy consequence. I did my best to show compassion and listen. Eventually I asked, “So what do you think you need to do?” He talked about his church involvement and the need for other guy friends. I told him his solution sounded like a great idea, that he always seems to know the right thing to do and that I am proud of him. He wrote me later and thanked me for my advice. My advice? His plan for change was all his idea. Growth has a longer lasting impact when we allow others to make those connections themselves.

We have good intentions. We desire to help others grow. The problem is we want it so much that we don’t accept the fact that not all Christians want to grow. We refuse to do what God does and accept no for an answer. We can see our own folly in how we recruit others to a conference, a short-term missions project, or a small group. We can love, teach, and build relationships, but the choice to participate, to be committed, to say yes and no to God is theirs.

NOT ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY THAT BELONGS TO THEM

We not only fail to allow our disciples the opportunity to say no, but we take responsibility for them. We do or say things to pick up the slack for their own lack of engagement and responsibility. We think, process and set standards for them. Our over responsibility comes out in the age old sex and dating question, “How far should I go (sexually) with her or him.” This is a no win question. I used to answer it but now I never do. If I tell them how far I think they should go, they will either use it as an excuse to go that far and when they blow it they blame me, or they write off what I say as being unreal and then do what they want anyway. To even answer the question is to start taking responsibility for their behavior and growth.

Dan was on a short-term missions project with Campus Crusade. He built deep relationships and grew in wonderful ways. Upon return to campus he experienced a let down. The relationships were not as intense, the mission less focused. By Christmas break he had about had it with Campus Crusade. As Dan rode with me to the pharmacy one day, he poured out his heart to me about his discontent. I listened, I understood and I could have solved his problem. But I didn’t. I looked over at him and said, “Dan what you said really stinks. What do you think you could do about it?”

For the next ten minutes he gave solution after solution. Finally he said, “Well it’s like you said I just have to…” I reminded him that it was not I but he who said it. He drove on with a big grin and a determination to be responsible for his life and do something about his problem.
HELPING THEM TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” The man said, “The woman you put here with me — she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:11-13)

The attitude of irresponsibility is rampant in society. I cannot keep count of the number of male students who say to me in reference to moral failure, “God created me, He knows I am weak, He understands.” Without realizing it, they are making God responsible for their sin. They might as well say, “God it’s your fault I slept with this woman because you gave me these desires. You blew it God, not me.” Can you imagine? Sounds like Adam in the garden. That person will never grow as long as they blame God for their choices and sin.

Whether it’s God, others, circumstances, or faulty DNA, the list of reasons somehow makes one the victim with no responsibility for ensuing consequences. We need to help our disciples see, like Adam and Eve in the garden, when they are not taking responsibility for their actions and choices. This is of greater value to their growth than dealing with any specific sin or failure.

A RESPONSIBLE LIFE IS NOT LIVED BY FEELINGS AND CIRCUMSTANCES

An increasing number of Christians live by feelings. They equate being led by the Spirit with being led by how they feel. It’s difficult to disagree because feelings are subjective. Telling them that their feelings are only feelings is like saying God does not lead them.

Understanding where feelings come from helps others understand the role of feelings. Imagine two people who are dating. The guy asks the woman out for a Friday night. She says she’s busy and gives no further information. He feels left hanging. Friday night he goes to the movies with the guys and sees her walk in with another man’s arm around her. What does he feel now? Monday morning he bumps into her in class. She acts as if nothing is wrong. As they chat, she says, “My brother is a marine and he was in town this weekend and we went to see…” Now what does he feel? What generated the feelings?

The point is, feelings are often generated by how we interpret circumstances. When choices are made based on feelings, it’s really the circumstances that are leading us and not the Spirit. Thus, circumstances become responsible, and not us. The individual escapes responsibility for growth and ends up blaming God for the life they lead.

Furthermore, we know Satan too generates circumstances. This should be enough warning for us to live by faith in the present and base our choices on what God says, not on our feelings about circumstances.
Helping others become responsible for their life and mission is not all that hard. But we pay a price. We are forced to give up control of that person and their future. We must run the risk of losing that person. We also risk being hurt. On the other hand, we gain great freedom in ministering to others. We are free to speak the truth in love and others’ decisions. We are free from manipulating behavior. We are free to be ourselves. And conversely, we free those around us to grow. We free them to be real. We free them from performance, which they usually get tired of sooner or later and quit any way. We free them to experience life’s consequences. And best of all we free them to grow to maturity and experience all the fullness of a life surrendered to God in brokenness and humility.