

We often hear the word “responsible” in our everyday life.

“She is responsible for providing the leadership which has enabled us to make great progress in this field of endeavor.”

“He is responsible for that department: Let me connect you.”

“The person who is responsible for this crime will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.”

“You’ll have to be more responsible so that things like this won’t happen.”

Day in and day out, we are reminded that being responsible is one of the things human beings consider important. Knowing who is responsible for whatever good or evil we experience is necessary. But what does it mean to be responsible? What am I really saying when I say, “I am responsible?” Specifically, what does it mean in the realm of the Christian faith?

To say that one is responsible is in the first place to assume a given condition of human life: That we are all able to respond to the stimuli that we experience.

It is a universal expectation. To be fully human is to be able to respond. When we are not able to respond, our humanity is less than complete. With the exception of certain persons who are mentally or physically handicapped, responsibility is something we all have in common, whether we know or accept it personally.

So, if we say we are able to respond, then it follows that we are accountable for the response we make. In the light of the Biblical revelation, it has to be said that responsibility is one essential ingredient in the identity of a self-professed child of God. Who am I in the eyes of my Creator?

I am formed of the dust – a part of the material universe in which I live.

I am washed and cleansed – by water from living springs that flow from the Source of all life.

I am chosen – to play a special role in the life of creation. And...

I am responsible – for how I deal with all this information about myself.

God has indeed given us something to respond to! Moreover, God asks us for a response – a personal as well as a corporate one. We can postpone the response as long as we wish. Or our response may be less than adequate, or even inappropriate, but we will ultimately be faced with a situation in which we will have to respond. In expecting a response from us, God is really expecting only that which we have already established to be a reasonable and universal expectation in the set of expectations human beings have of one another.

Whereas the Law implies that it is the duty of God's people to respond, the Gospel proclaims it is a joy!

I am not speaking in moralistic terms. The Ten Commandments have to be more than moralism. Their contemporary meaning is very important – illuminating the way we understand God's call to us.

For example, the commandment to serve no other gods needs to be seen in a world where our other gods are no longer Baal or Astarte, but political ideologies, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, race or ethnicity, culture or class-consciousness... The commandment to honor our father and mother is not a call to fulfill the obligations of the extended family in a patriarchal agrarian society, but it has some very profound implications for living with our parents who are always a part of us. The admonition against adultery today exists neither for the purpose of protecting our property (i.e. wives) nor for guaranteeing our immortality in our children. It relates to a profound sense of mutual fidelity only recently identified in the Christian theology of marriage.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the same God who spoke the Ten Commandments, calls us into a covenant that is not prescribed by laws written on stone or in a book. This is the God, as Jeremiah tells us, who writes the covenant on our hearts. It is entirely right and appropriate in any age to state the ethical norms for our behavior, but they do not exist for their own ends. These norms are efforts to describe action that is most human, the best response to what God has expressed to us.

They are a penultimate word, subservient to the ultimate word, which is the personal relationship between God and humanity. This is the covenant written upon our hearts.

Moral character is formed by living with people of moral character. It is a process of assimilation, not one of acquiring information. The Ten Commandments seen in the light of Christ do not force obligation. They measure the depth of our relationship with God and God's people.

It is the joy of the believer to respond to God!

This is at the heart of Jesus' outburst at the Temple. He recognized a forced, oppressive response and literally overturned it. He was not seeking to destroy the Temple cultus but to transform it. God reaches out to us in an expression of love. Christ is the clearest expression of that love. He yearns for a response of love answering love.

When we do respond, when we are truly responsible, we realize that something is changed in us. Our response to everything becomes a response to God. We learn that responding is the way we experience a relationship with God. If we never stop to listen or to speak with God, we will never really know God at all. But when we do, we understand what St. John of the Cross meant when he said that the Word of God is the effect upon the soul. The Word of God is power because power is whatever can change us. Prayer is an attitude of being open to the power of God, God's Word, as manifest in the profound mystery of the cross. To hear and respond in this way is to be responsible and, thus, to experience the wisdom, power, and glory of God.