

“Accepting Responsibility for Your Actions”

26 July 1953
[Atlanta, Ga.]

King most likely delivered this sermon as a radio address for Atlanta's WERD while serving as associate pastor at Ebenezer during the summer of 1953.¹ The following May, when King delivered his acceptance address at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, he also preached a version of this sermon, explicitly emphasizing his commitment to the social gospel.²

One of the most common tendencies of human nature is that of placing responsibility on some external agency for sins we have committed or mistakes we have made. We are forever attempting to find some scapegoat on which we cast responsibility for our actions. Herein lies the tragic misuse of much of our modern psychology, particularly what is known as depth psychology or psychoanalysis. This school of thought affirms that many of our conscious actions are due to unconscious motives. Now there is a kernel of truth in this theory and we owe a great debt to Sigmund Freud for opening to us the uncharted regions of the sub-conscious. But the tragedy lies in the fact that many modern men have used this theory as an attractive defense mechanism. How easy it was to say that unconscious emotions and repressed sex drives were responsible for our actions rather than plain everyday sin.

¹ At the end of this document, King wrote “Preached July 26, 1953,” the date he assigned to this title in his list of his radio sermons for the summer of 1953 (King, “Radio Sermons” 26 July–6 September 1953, p. 136 in this volume). King’s announced sermon on 28 June 1953 was “Accepting Responsibility for Your Actions” (“Rev. King Jr. Slated at Ebenezer Sunday,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 27 June 1953).

² King wrote “Preached at Dexter, May 2, 1954” at the end of this document and also noted, “ARYA Preached at Dexter May 2, 1954” on the inside of the file folder containing this document (King, “Acceptance Address at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 2 May 1954,” pp. 166–167 in this volume).

26 July 1953

The word sin was gradually eliminated from the modern vocabulary and there emerged in its place a series of bombastic psychological phrases such as phobias, complexes, and inhibitions. And so modern man was convinced that psychology had given him explanations which relieved him of any responsibility for his actions.

This tendency to thrust responsibility for our actions on some eternal agency is by no means a new one. The Genesis writers found it present in the very beginning of history. Remember the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? God had placed Adam and Eve in the garden to dress it. They were given liberty to make use of everything in the garden with the exception of one thing: "They were not to eat of the tree of good and evil." Very soon a serpent appeared on the scene and said, "Hath God said, ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" And Eve answered, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the tree of good and evil God has commanded that we not eat or touch lest we die." And the serpent answered, "Ye shall not surely die, for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." After listening to these cogent words by the subtle serpent, Eve yielded to the temptation and very soon Adam and Eve were found eating from the tree that God had forbidden them to touch. When God came back on the scene to ascertain why this sin had been committed, he found each shifting responsibility on some external agency. Adam's answer was that the woman caused him to eat of the tree. Eve claimed that the serpent caused her to eat of the tree.³ Neither Adam nor Eve stopped to realize that although they were tempted by external agencies, they were, in the final analysis, responsible for yielding to the temptation. Ultimately individual responsibility lies not in the external situation but in the internal response.

We are all familiar with the most common agencies on which we project responsibility for our actions. First we turn to environment. How easy it is for one to affirm that one's whole personality make-up and indeed one's very destiny itself is determined by one's environment. Here is a man about forty now whose life has been given in riotous living. Now as he looks back over these wasted years his comment is, "I would have been if I had been {in} a rich family with prestige and fame or if I had been in a more progressive community. It is my environment that has corrupted me." Yet such persons as this fail to realize that many individuals rise from the very lowest of environments to be some of the most noble characters of human history. There is a Marian Anderson, born in a poverty stricken area of Phila. Pa. She could have very easily given up in despair and cried out that she was born in the wrong environment. But she was not one to make excuses. This same Marian Anderson rose from a poverty stricken environment to be one of the world's greatest contraltos, so that a Toscanini can say that a voice like this comes only once in a century and a Seballius of Finland can say, "My roof is too low for such a voice."⁴ There is a Roland Hayes, born on the red hills of Gordon County Georgia under

³ Cf. Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-13.

⁴ Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957), an internationally recognized conductor, and Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) made these comments on Anderson's singing during her concert tours of Europe in the 1930s (Anderson, *My Lord, What a Morning* [New York: Viking Press, 1956], pp. 149, 158). King owned Anderson's autobiography and kept it in his personal library.

26 July 1953

the most crippling restrictions. At a very early age he found himself working in an iron foundry of Chatanooga Tenn. But from these red hills of Georgia, he rose to the palace of Queen Mother of Spain. From this iron foundry in Chatanooga, Tenn., he rose to the palace of King George the 5th.⁵ There was an Abraham Lincoln, born in poverty and insecurity, later working as a Kentucky rail splitter. Yet this same Abraham Lincoln rose from a Kentucky rail splitter to be one of the greatest characters in the great drama of history. These are but few of the many examples that could be used to refute the claim that one is completely determined by his environment. Those who hold such a position fail to see that many fine and noble persons stem from bad environments and many very bad and corrupt persons stem from comfortable and desirable environments.

Another external agency on which we readily cast responsibility for our actions is heredity. There are those who would affirm that one is completely determined by heredity. How easy it is to say, "I would have been better if I had had better hereditary circumstances."

Here again those who project total responsibility for their actions on hereditary circumstances fail to see that numerous individuals rise above such circumstances. There is a John Bunyan, deprived of his physical sight, and yet he wrote a Pilgrim's Progress that generations will cherish so long as the cords of memory shall lengthen.⁶ There is a Franklin D. Roosevelt, afflicted with infantile paralysis and yet he rises up to leave such an imprint in the sands of our nation's history, that future history books will be incomplete without his name. There is a Helen Keller, burdened with blindness and deafness, and she rises up to live such a sublime and noble life that millions have come to admire her as one of the choicest fruits on the tree of history.⁷ These are but few of those who have proved that man is not finally caught in the clutches of heredity. He has within himself the power to transcend the disadvantages of bad hereditary conditions. As a world famous psychologist has said, "After going through the experimental and clinical literature, the thoughtful reader will conclude that the effects of personality upon glands are more impressive and easier to illustrate than are the effects of the glands upon personality."⁸

I must hasten to say that the above assertions do not mean to imply that heredity and environment are not important. I happen to be a firm believer in what is called the "social gospel." Indeed, no one can intelligently care for personal life without caring about genetics and social reform. Moreover, the above assertions do not mean to imply that our actions are not somewhat conditioned by external influences. When one considers the cosmic setting of our lives, our absolute dependence on the maintenance of the earth's heat and moisture, the determining effect on each individual of the race's biological evolution, the momentous consequences of

⁵ King refers to tenor Roland Hayes's successful singing tour of Europe.

⁶ John Bunyan (1628–1688) was an English preacher and Christian writer who, in 1678, published *Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegory of the Christian path to salvation.

⁷ Helen Keller (1880–1968).

⁸ Fosdick included this quotation in his sermon "Shouldering Responsibility for Ourselves," in *On Being a Real Person* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), p. 7. King drew a line next to it in his copy of *On Being a Real Person* and wrote, "quote." Fosdick attributed the quotation to Starke R. Hathaway's *Physiological Psychology* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1942), p. 203.

26 July 1953

heredity, and the conditioning effect of environment, one cannot lightly talk about being the master of one's fate and the captain of one's soul⁹ Far from saying that environment and heredity have no importance in human personality, what I am really saying is that there is another factor which is the ultimate determining factor (*viz*) personal response And herein lies our responsibility We are not responsible for the environment we are born in, neither are we responsible for our hereditary circumstances But there is a third factor for which we are responsible namely, the personal response which we make to these circumstances

And so the challenge which confronts all of us is to respond to our circumstances with strength and courage rather than with weakness and despair Who in all history can serve as a better example for us at this point than our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ? There was nothing so comfortable and advantageous about His environmental and hereditary circumstances He was born in a stable and raised on a carpenter's bench His mother and father were not members of the upper crust of Jewish society They did not enjoy the power of the aristocratic Pharisee or the prestige of the cosmopolitan Saducee Jesus was born in plain unpretentious circumstances But Jesus had within himself a power of personal response which was destined to transform his circumstances This same Jesus who was born in an ox stable, rose up to be the strongest and tallest oak in the great forest of history This same Jesus, rose from a carpenter's bench to give impetus to a movement which has grown from a group of 12 men to more than 700,000,000 today This same Jesus split history into A D. and B C This same Jesus so convinced men that His message is eternal and universal that they have triumphantly sung

Jesus shall reign where ere the sun
Does his successive journeys run,
His kingdom spread from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more¹⁰

Not environment, not heredity, but personal response is the final determining factor in our lives. And herein lies our area of responsibility¹¹

Preached July 26, 1953

{Preached at Dexter, May 2, 1954}

TAD CSKC Sermon file, folder 66, "Accepting Responsibility for Your Actions" / "Faith In Man "

9 King paraphrases William E Henley's 1875 poem "Invictus" "It matters not how strait the gate / How charged with punishments the scroll / I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul "

10 King quotes from Isaac Watts's hymn "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun" (1719)

11 Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, p 4 "Three factors enter into the building of personality heredity, environment, and personal response " Next to these words, King wrote "quote (environment)" in his copy of Fosdick's book He also underlined the words "personality heredity, environment and personal response "