

## **THE POWER OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY (Hebrews 3:7-15)**

The year must have been about 1970. I was in first grade at Ridgeview Elementary School in OKC. Mrs. Shield's was my teacher, and Danny Stansbury was seated in the desk just ahead of mine.

As I remember, Danny was an amazing kid. I once saw him do something that I had never seen anybody else do. He untied his right shoe so that it was loose and would come off if he kicked with his right foot. After much practice I am sure, Danny had learned to kick with enough force to cause his right shoe to fly up and over a neighborhood telephone wire. He successfully demonstrated his expertise. I was duly impressed. I don't really remember, but I imagine I tried to reproduce what I saw him do, but without equaling his success.

One day in first grade Danny turned around and spoke to me while class was going on. Mrs. Shield's ran a pretty tight ship; in her class, students were not allowed to speak to their neighbor without prior permission from her. When Danny spoke to me, I naturally replied. That is when Mrs. Shields politely, but firmly, asked both Danny and me to remain in her classroom at the end of the school day.

When everyone else had left and just Mrs. Shields, Danny, and I remained, I took that opportunity to explain how that it was not my fault that I spoke, that I was just replying to Danny who had spoken to me first.

The protestations of my innocence did not seem to carry much weight with Mrs. Shields. She promptly told me something that I have not forgotten. She said, "No one can make you do what you do not want to do."

As a 6-year-old, I lacked the ability to mount a serious counter-argument. There is a part of me that would like to go back in time and say: "Mrs. Shields, I appreciate the point you are making, but let's be honest, people are routinely made to do things they don't really want to do, such as pay taxes, go to war because they got drafted, or stay after school when they would rather walk home." At that point, I would have thrown Danny under the bus. "Listen, I didn't want to talk to Danny. I didn't invite him to turn around and talk with me. He did that of his own accord. It's his fault, not mine."

Of course, I didn't do that, and it's good that I didn't. I learned many things from Mrs. Shields during my first year of school, and one of the greatest lessons I learned was taught not during the school day but after it. I learned the importance of taking personal responsibility for my actions.

The title of today's message is, The Power of Personal Responsibility. There is something empowering about accepting responsibility for what you do and do not do.

Taking personal responsibility does not seem to be in vogue today. It appears that when people do something wrong it is someone else's fault. When people fail someone else is to blame.

I am reminded of the *Peanuts* cartoon that featured Peppermint Patty talking to Charlie Brown. She said, "Guess what, Chuck. The first day of school and I got sent to the principal's office. It was your fault, Chuck."

Charlie Brown replied, “My fault? How could it be my fault? Why do you say everything is my fault?”

Peppermint Patty answered, “You’re my friend, aren’t you, Chuck? You should have been a better influence on me.”

We need to learn to take personal responsibility for the decisions we make, the actions we take, and the words we speak. We are responsible for what we put in our body and what we do with our body. We are responsible for our entertainment choices—what we watch, read, and the events we attend.

I am also reminded of the fellow who complained about the sex and violence on his DVD player.

Like it or not, we are responsible for the decisions we make and the actions we take.

In Hebrews 3:7-15, the author addresses the matter of taking personal responsibility. He teaches that great things happen and God actually empowers us when we dare to accept personal responsibility. The first thing we notice is . . .

### **God Empowers Us When We Choose to Take Him at His Word**

Look at the first six words, in my version, of Hebrews 3:7. The word “therefore” points us back to the message of vv. 1-6. In the previous verses, the author was drawing a contrast between Moses and Jesus. He has been arguing that Jesus is greater than Moses. Moses was a servant, but Jesus is a Son. Moses was in God’s house, but Jesus is over God’s house.

The main message of that passage is found in the first verse. We are to consider Jesus. We are to focus on Him.

The writer goes on to make the point that we, the church, the people of God, constitute God’s house. We are God’s house. Then, he adds a condition. He says we are God’s house if “we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.” The NLT renders that verse, “And we are God’s household, if we keep up our courage and remain confident in our hope in Christ.”

Eugene Peterson paraphrases that verse, “Now, if we can only keep a firm grip on this bold confidence, we’re the house!”

So, what is the key to holding tightly to what God has promised? The very next phrase of the text is, “as the Holy Spirit says.”

Do you want to be firm in your faith? Here’s how: Give attention to what God says.

I cannot overemphasize how important this phrase is. The writer uses this phrase to introduce a quotation from Psalm 95. The interesting thing is that the author did not write, “As David said” or “As the psalmist recorded.” What is the implication he is making by writing “As the Holy Spirit says”? Actually, there are two hugely important implications.

**Implication #1: The Bible is the word of God.** This Book is not just a theological treatise composed by men. This book is not inspired on the same level that Shakespeare wrote inspired prose and verse. Paul wasn’t joking when he wrote, “All Scripture is breathed out by God . . .” (2 Timothy 3:16).

By the way, let me take this opportunity to point out that this is a great support for our

belief that the Holy Spirit is a Person, the third Person of the Trinity. Orthodox Christianity has always taught there is one God, but there are three Persons within the God-head: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We do not have three Gods. We have one God who is made up of three Persons.

Many people have been infected with what I call, “Star Wars theology.” They view the Holy Spirit as a force. Verse 7 tells us, “The Holy Spirit says.” A Force doesn’t speak, but a person does. Elsewhere, Scripture tells us to not grieve the Holy Spirit. You can’t grieve a force, but you can a person.

**Implication #2: The Holy Spirit is still speaking.** Did you notice that this phrase is written in the present tense and not the past tense? The author did not introduce the passage from Psalm 95 by writing “as the Holy Spirit said” but rather, “as the Holy Spirit says.” What does that tell you?

The Holy Spirit is still speaking. Do you want God to speak to you? If you do, read this Book. As we read this Book, God speaks to us.

If anyone ever asks you, “Does God speak to you?”, you can honestly answer, “All the time.” Whenever you read His word, He is speaking to you.

If you want to become what God wants you to become, you have to take personal responsibility. And that starts with taking God at His word.

This does not mean it is all on you. You can’t make yourself grow—no more than a farmer can make the seed he plants grow. While he can’t make his crops grow, he can prepare the conditions. We can, too. We prepare the conditions for God to grow us as we read His word, spend time in prayer, worshipping Him and focusing on Him.

One person defined responsibility as our response to God’s ability. God is the able one, but we are to respond obediently to Him.

That brings us to the next point.

## **God Empowers Us When We Choose to Obey Him Fully**

Look at the rest of v. 7 to the end of v. 12. God is faithful to speak, and when He speaks, we must respond. We can hear God and harden our hearts or we can hear God and hasten to obey. The choice is entirely ours.

Verses 7-11 are a quotation from Psalm 95, so let’s turn to Psalm 95. The psalm opens with a great invitation to worship. This morning we read these verses at the beginning of our worship service as a call to worship.

With the beginning of v.7, however, the psalm takes a dramatic turn. It goes from a call to worship right to the invitation. The reader is called upon to make a decision. As motivation to make the right decision, the psalmist recalls an OT story. What story does he recall? The story is told in Numbers 13 and 14.

Concerning this story, Warren Wiersbe wrote, “Unbelief blinds you to God’s greatness and magnifies your own weakness.” He went on to write, “The important question is not, ‘How big is the problem?’ or ‘How big am I?’ The major question is, ‘How big is my God?’”

When you know your God is big, you can launch out and obey Him.

The writer emphasizes the word “today.” *Today* is used three times in our text (vv.7, 13, & 15). The writer of Hebrews was pressing the urgency of the matter.

N.T. Wright explained that the Jewish people “had been living in what you might call ‘tomorrow mode’ for long enough; now it was ‘today mode’, the moment when suddenly it was all happening. If only they would remember that, they would stay on track.”

Do you ever get stuck on *tomorrow mode*? Or more likely, you may find yourself caught in *yesterday mode*. When you think about your Christian life, do you focus on what happened in the past? Do you think about the church you used to attend, the great things that once happened (your salvation, your baptism, the excitement you once had)? It may be time to turn the page and begin living in *today mode*. What are you going to do today to grow? What are you going to do today to serve? What is God calling you to be and to do today?

From our text we know that a hardened heart, a heart that doesn’t trust God, is a restless heart. There is a huge difference between taking personal responsibility and relying completely on yourself. A person who does not rely on God has no one to rely on but himself, and that is an exhausting way to live.

Right now, the Olympics are going on in China. I want to take you back 20 years. It was on February 19, 2002 that Vonetta Flowers made Olympic history. She became the first person of African descent to medal in the Winter Games. She and fellow bobsledder Jill Bakken won the gold medal for the USA. in a world record setting time. It almost didn’t happen.

Vonetta had been a track star. She had a full-ride scholarship to the University of Alabama in Birmingham. She had a great chance of making her way onto the 1996 Olympic team, but an ankle injury dashed those hopes. Just four months before the trials for the 2000 Olympics, she underwent her fifth ankle surgery in eight years.

Soon after becoming a Christian and getting married, her husband encouraged her to train for the USA bobsled team. She began training and was chosen as a brakeman, and in 2001, she and her teammate were rated #3 in the world. It looked like she was a lock for the 2002 Winter Olympics. She was devastated when her partner dumped her for another brakeman.

She thought her dream of Olympic competition was over, but her husband Johnny wouldn’t let her quit. He said, “God put you in this sport for a reason, so we’re going to start training again.” Vonetta confessed, “I’m like, ‘Training for what? I’m off the team!’ But he just kept saying, ‘God put you in this sport for a reason.’”

Vonetta was doubtful, but she started training again. She said, “I’d forgotten who’s in charge. It’s not me; God’s in charge and he knows how everything is going to turn out.” Within a week after returning to the track, she got a phone call from Jill Bakken, the number-two driver in the world, asking Vonetta to join her team.

Jill and Vonetta won Olympic gold at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah. Vonetta explained her philosophy: “I just put my faith in God and let him take over. I do my job of training and put the rest in his hands.”

A person who trusts in self rather than God has no rest in this life, and he will not know God’s rest in the life to come. One of my favorite verses of Scripture is Revelation

14:13, “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’”

Let’s trust God, obey Him, and let Him be in charge.

## **God Empowers Us When We Choose to Help One Another**

Look at vv. 13-14. You and I are in this thing together. We are brothers and sisters. We are to take care of and encourage one another.

N.T. Wright warned:

There is such a thing as “the deceitfulness of sin,” and it’s very powerful. You start by allowing yourself the luxury of doing something small which you know you shouldn’t but which you think doesn’t matter. When it becomes a habit, you stop thinking it is wrong at all . . . This creates a platform for the next move: here’s something else which a while ago you would have shunned as certainly wrong, but it’s quite like the thing you’ve gotten used to, so maybe . . . And before too long you’re rationalizing that as well. And once the mind has been deceived, the habit will continue unchecked.

Before the deceitfulness of sin begins its deadly work in our lives, we need a brother to come alongside and encourage us. And before this downward spiral starts in the life of another, we need to come alongside and encourage him or her.

Here in v. 13, we find the answers to three questions: Who, When, and Why?

**Who is to do the encouraging?** You and me. You can’t exempt yourself by saying, “Well, I don’t have the gift of encouragement?” Encouragement is not a gift; it is a responsibility.

**When are we to encourage?** Just like we need to obey today, we need to encourage today.

I heard a story about a farmer who was awakened in the middle of the night by loud banging on his front door. The farmer crawled out of bed and grumpily went downstairs. When he opened the front door, he found a man standing in the rain dripping wet. The man obviously he had been drinking. The stranger said to him; “I’m stuck can you give me a push?” The farmer replied sharply; “NO! Go and sober up, and I’ll sort it out in the morning!” The farmer slammed the door and went upstairs.

When he got back into bed the farmer’s wife asked him what had happened. He explained and his wife said to him; “That wasn’t a very Christian to do. He could be in trouble, and you have just sent him out into the storm for the rest of the night! You should go and help that man.”

Reluctantly, the farmer got out of bed a second time and put on his coat and went downstairs. He figured he wasn’t going to get any peace until he did something for the man out in the rain. When he got to the front door the rain was pouring down and he couldn’t see the other man, but he could hear a faint noise out in the front yard so he called out; “Hello? Are you still there? What can I do to help?”

The other man replied; “Could you give me a push?”

The farmer said, “I’d be happy to if I could see you, where are you?”

The man answered, “I’m over here, on your swing!”

When people ask for your help, it is possible they are taking advantage of you, but sometimes you never know until you help. I think we should err on the side of helping those who don’t need it rather than risk not helping those who truly do.

**Why do we encourage?** The purpose is to help our brother and sister overcome sin. If Jesus died for our sin, surely, we can inconvenience ourselves just a little to help someone overcome his/her sin.

When my son ran cross country, I was able to attend some of his events. One of the things I liked was that as runners would near the end of their race, the final couple of hundred meters were often lined with parents and other spectators cheering on the runners. The time didn’t matter. The place the runner finished didn’t matter. The fact the runner was finishing is what mattered, and as they finished the crowd yelled encouragement to the runner: “Way to go! You’re doing great! Finish strong!”

That is what we are to do for one another.

Someone once said:

Flatter me and I may not believe you.

Criticize me and I may not like you.

Ignore me and I may not forgive you.

Praise me and I will not forget you.

The Lord won’t forget us either when we do what He has called us to do: Encourage one another.

For the Christian, personal responsibility does not mean taking responsibility only for yourself. We have a responsibility to help and encourage others along the way.

I have often thought about that day in first grade when I got in trouble because Danny turned around and spoke to me. I finally realized, however, that I didn’t get in trouble because of what Danny did. I got in trouble because of what I didn’t do. Instead of answering him, I should have put my finger of one hand over my lips, and with the finger of the other hand, I should have pointed his attention to the teacher. That would have kept me from getting in trouble, and it likely would have kept him from getting into trouble.

We are brother and sisters. Let’s take personal responsibility for helping ourselves and one another to trust and obey God. Just in case you didn’t catch it, we should do that today. Today is the only day we have.