

Section E

Levels of Personal Responsibility: When You're Responsible for a Sin ...and When You're Not

Step 2.2 of the BNL process asks an important question: "Are you always *spiritually* responsible, at fault, and accountable for a sin?" The simple answer is, "No you're not... not always." Just as it's possible for you to sin in your mind and heart without actually doing so in outward life (Matthew 5:28), the opposite is also true: you may be guilty on the level of outward life or in the eyes of the law, but not yet on the level of your heart, mind, spirit, or character—i.e., not yet in the eyes of God. Here's how:

The human mind or spirit is made up of two basic parts: the knowing, understanding, thinking part, and the loving, willing, intending part. In order for you to be spiritually responsible or at fault for any action, both parts have to be fully functional and involved. In other words, in order for you to be spiritually responsible, you have to *know* what you're doing at the time, and you have to *willingly* do it. If one or both of these conditions isn't met, your mind/spirit isn't fully engaged. Therefore, you aren't yet spiritually responsible, at fault, or accountable.

Here are some examples. Suppose you've said or done something that is against God, but you didn't know any better, or you didn't realize what was going on at the time. Or maybe you did it in a moment of overwhelming feeling, emotion, desire, etc. If either or both of these things were true, your mind wasn't fully engaged in what you were doing. The sin you committed was one of ignorance (lack of awareness) or overwhelming passion; it wasn't yet a sin *within* you—i.e., in your heart, mind, spirit, or character.

Based on these insights, here are some examples of when you're not spiritually responsible for a sin. Notice that each of them falls under one or both of the general conditions mentioned above.

- As said, you do something harmful or destructive, but you don't know any better, or you don't realize what's going on at the time.
- You do or say something harmful based on a false idea, premise, or impression that you honestly believe is true.
- You do something damaging, but you aren't in your right mind at the time due to a mental or physical illness, biological imbalance, or the like.
- You do something that is against God, but you're delirious, deluded, intoxicated, or otherwise irrational at the time.
- You commit a transgression or sin, but your action is a learned behavior from the example of others, before you realize that it's against God.
- You do something that is against God, but were forced, coerced, seduced, or threatened into doing it. You aren't a willing participant.

- You do something harmful, but you didn't mean to—you didn't intend harm.
- You do or say something that is destructive and against God, but you do so impulsively, without thinking. It's a type of "knee-jerk reaction," similar to functioning on blind instinct.
- You lose your composure or "fly off the handle," and you do or say something you later regret (Deuteronomy 19:5).
- You did something harmful or destructive in your childhood or youth, before your adult, rational mind was fully open and accessible—the twentieth year of life by biblical standard (Exodus 30:14).

What matters under any of these circumstances (or others like them) is what you choose to do "after the fact"—once you *know* that a thing is against God, and when your mind is fully *free to choose*. For example, do you, "after the fact," *justify* what you've done, or are you *clear with yourself* that it was harmful and against God? Do you *persist* in the harmful, destructive behavior, even when you're able to choose against it, or do you exercise your free will, *resist* the behavior, and *abstain* from it? How you conduct yourself, once you *know* that something is against God, and you're fully *free to choose*, is what determines spiritual responsibility / accountability in what you do or say.

Knowing these things can lend a balanced, helpful, perspective on yourself, your actions, and your relationship with God during Step 2.2 of the BNL process. It isn't a way *out* of accepting responsibility, but it does include spiritual realities that can figure in, any time you're accepting responsibility for a sin.

Good wishes in Step 2.2 of the process.