

# Accepting Consequences

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*Bishop Paul V. Marshall*

The prophet Hosea spoke of those who sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. Humorist Will Rogers said that religious people sow wild oats six days a week, and, on the seventh day, pray for crop failure. Either way, there does seem to be something in the religious mind that seeks to suspend cause and effect, or at least to change the odds.

In early Lent we read about Jesus being tempted. The last of those temptations is to jump off a tower to demonstrate that God really would take care of him. His response: you should not tempt the Lord your God.

We often do, individually and corporately, tempt God or tempt fate, however one puts it. Then when the axe falls, we feel that God has let us down by not protecting us from the consequences of our behavior.

Philosophers and religious thinkers know that every system breaks down a bit when trying to account for evil and random suffering. There is nonetheless reason to consider how much cause and effect rather than a vengeful God are at the root of some of our problems.

I have sat at the bedside of a person who smoked heavily for more than thirty years and wept about their lung cancer, "Why did God do this to me?" I have myself been a person who indulged in carbohydrates (especially Oreos) immoderately and wondered why I was "stricken" with adult-onset diabetes.

If we abuse our bodies, they will rebel. If we neglect our children, their personalities may well form in ways that disconcert us. If we are not emotionally present to our spouses they may stray. If we do not work

daily on prayer and spiritual practices, when crisis comes we may well perceive nothing but emptiness. It isn't vengeance; it's the way things work.

If this is true on the individual level, one cannot but ask if it is true on the societal level. The prophets of Israel tried to warn their contemporaries that their aggressively two-class society would bring only doom. As the distance between the have's and have-not's widens in America, do we presume to think that God will protect us from the same results?

Biblical prophets were killed for saying this sort of thing. People who say it today are simply made fun of. Neither method of disposing of the messenger prevents the results. Nonetheless, behaviors have consequences. Religious people might well ask themselves if they are expecting to be excused from the laws of cause and effect with regard to how they treat their bodies, their loved ones, and society.

Think of the tremendous forces one must overcome just to change one's

eating or smoking or exercise habits. How many times must one multiply that to get an idea of the amount of resistance a political system has to righting wrongs from which people profit? It makes sense to acknowledge that only those who have the insight and the persistence to regulate themselves will be able to orchestrate change on any larger level. Nobody loses weight or builds muscles just by being angry at their fat or their puniness. People who want to change must take responsibility for a plan that they follow with a kind of ruthlessness.

The New Testament says that we look to Jesus in part because "he was tempted in every way as we are, but did not sin." Jesus did not presume on his status with God; he did not jump off the tower. Neither ought we to take foolish chances assuming that God will rescue us from our own behavior.

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