

Be Like Martha? God’s Invitation to Over-Responsible People



by LAURA ANDREWS

When you hear someone described as “over-responsible,” does anyone you know come to mind? Perhaps it’s a friend who habitually overcommits himself and is always on the verge of burnout. Maybe it’s a person you counsel who worries constantly and struggles with perfectionism. Or maybe it’s that family member who frequently intrudes on your affairs and offers unsolicited advice when she is “just trying to help.”

Maybe you think of yourself. I know I do. When I was in high school, some of my friends called me “mom” because I often expressed my concerns about their choices. I wasn’t particularly offended by the nickname. I thought being recognized as responsible was a positive thing, even if it wasn’t always welcomed by others. But as the years passed, I realized that there are weaknesses to being over-responsible, ones that I’ve never been able to shake.

Maybe you hear *over-responsible* and feel confused by the implications. As a friend of mine put it, “How can someone be too responsible? I thought responsibility was a good thing!” You may intuitively know that being excessively responsible is problematic, but you can’t put your finger on why because it appears to be virtuous. After all, it is often the over-responsible ones who come to the rescue when others are neglecting their responsibilities. But while compensating for another’s negligence is sometimes necessary,

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being habitually over-responsible is, at best, exhausting. At worst, it lands us in a place of anxiety or frustration and tempts us to resent or control others. And of most concern, it reveals broken ways of engaging with God and a distorted understanding of his expectations. The hidden costs of over-responsibility—for strugglers and even for those they are seeking to serve—far outweigh the apparent benefits.

Counselors have a unique opportunity to help over-responsible people slow down, recognize their struggle, and practice living within their limits. The goal of this article is to equip counselors to:

- identify a person's tendencies toward over-responsibility,
- develop a biblical understanding of the nature of this struggle, and
- provide methods for addressing it in counseling.

To do this, we will unpack the interaction between Martha and Jesus in Luke 10:38–42. We will look at how Jesus meets Martha, the over-responsible hostess, in her struggle and how he invites her and those of us who are like her to become dependent followers and wise stewards as we encounter the endless needs of this world.

Identifying and Understanding Over-Responsibility

Recognizing over-responsibility can be challenging. It is not typically identified as the presenting problem and the concerns and goals of these counselees tend to sound good and appropriate. For example, they hope to improve a difficult relationship, or are seeking to make wise decisions about their future. Or they simply feel overwhelmed or discouraged by ongoing hardships in their lives and want to understand what they can do to address it. The issue lies, however, not in their problems themselves, but in how they instinctively and frenetically *respond* to them. So counselors must keep our eyes open for these common tendencies, or we may inadvertently reinforce them. Here are three.

Over-responsible people habitually take on more than they can handle. Most of us become overcommitted occasionally, but for over-responsible people it can be a way of life. Many factors are at work here. Over-responsible people tend to be highly sensitive to the needs of others and are empathetic about their pain. They are known for anticipating needs and for feeling pain that appears to exceed even that of the sufferer. This

inward sense of burden can lead them to impulsively attempt to resolve others' troubles, unaware that their actions are, at least in part, an attempt to resolve the intolerable anguish *they* feel for the other person.

Past experiences and present positions can also pressure them to take on unsustainable amounts of responsibility. Perhaps they have learned to depend only upon themselves and are slow to trust others because others have let them down. Or they have been conditioned to automatically assume obligation because circumstances required them to grow up fast. Or

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maybe their natural gifting or maturity led others to expect more of them than their peers. Present demanding roles, such as caretaking or leadership positions, imbalanced relationships, or cultural pressures, can expose them to a steady flow of demands and expectations from others, making it hard for them to do anything but react and try to meet the needs before them.

Over-responsible people cycle between “I can, so I must!” and “I can’t” modes. As over-responsible people move into the impossible place of carrying too much responsibility, they begin to vacillate between two modes: feeling and acting *hopeful* that they can fulfill the need (I can, so I must!), and feeling and acting *hopeless* (I can't do it).

The hopeful “I can, so I must!” mode is often characterized by a quick dive into analysis and action. When over-responsible people feel optimistic about tackling a challenge, they tend to immediately get to work strategizing how to solve the problem and start taking steps to do so. While there is nothing wrong with being thoughtful and responsive, analysis and action can often function as a kind of savior for over-responsible people; they trust that it will bring the results they seek. This analysis and action is also done independently of others because they like to control the results. Even when they pursue help or counsel from others, this aid—and those who offer it—are easily judged or disregarded if it doesn't produce quick and obvious results.

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