

Question: The shopping rush at this time of year reminds me of the incident a few years ago when a Walmart worker in New York was crushed to death by a stampede of people at a black Friday sale. Who should be held accountable for things like this?

The Bible does teach the principle of individual personal responsibility (Ezekiel 18), but it also teaches that we often have a community responsibility for things that happen among us. For example, when God helped the Israelites conquer the city of Jericho, he told them that they should take no spoil from the city. Everything in the city was to be devoted to the Lord. However, when Achan disobeyed and took some of the devoted things for himself, we are told that “the Israelites acted unfaithfully . . . so the LORD’s anger burned against Israel” (Joshua 7:1). The whole nation faced consequences because of the sin of one person (Joshua 7:2-12). Were there other Israelites who saw what Achan was doing but did not speak up? Did the general attitude expressed among the people toward God’s command encourage Achan’s disobedience? We are not told the answers to these questions; but God thought that something about their attitude, thinking or way of generally doing business contributed to the situation. Achan was individually responsible, but Israel was also held accountable.

In a similar way, the LORD charged his people in a later time with having hands that are “stained with blood” (Isaiah 59:1-3). Did this mean that everyone in the nation of Israel was personally guilty of killing someone? No. Yet they were held accountable as a nation for the kind of society that contributed to the numerous murders among them. They faced a community responsibility for what happened, as well as individual responsibility.

I suspect that few of the people who participated in the stampede in the Walmart store felt they had blood-stained hands. But they should have asked themselves: “Would this have happened if I had not allowed myself to get caught up in the group psychology that stampeded into the store to make a bargain purchase that day? Could I have made a difference? Was saving a few dollars on a purchase really worth risking my own life and the lives of others?” Should retail stores that mark down the price of a few special items to get large

numbers of people into their stores rethink how they do business? Should the advertising industry that often creates a frenzy to buy examine how their work is affecting some people?

My intention is not to place total responsibility on the whole of society, but I hope this will cause all of us to reflect on the values we hold in this consumer-driven society and how this may affect people around us. Faith in Jesus should reflect the values he taught, and those values can help to keep things in perspective. Jesus taught his followers: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24). Among other things, those who got caught up in the stampede in New York evidently lost their perspective on what is really important in life. Now a man is dead because of this.

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