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# RELATIONAL SINS & HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

Luke 17:1-4

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Luke Lesson 77

## Relational Sins & How to Deal With Them Luke 17:1-4

One of the things that I only half-jokingly tell the new members in our church is, "If we haven't offended you yet, please be patient. We will!" It is impossible in this fallen world to relate closely to anyone without causing offense at some point. Often it is unintentional, but sometimes, frankly, we mean to be mean!

Relational problems not only occur in the church; they also occur in the home and anywhere else that people have to work closely with one another. Sometimes when I counsel with couples I marvel at how this angry, bitter couple sitting in my office could be the same couple that just a few years before stood at the altar, gazing adoringly into each other's eyes, promising to love one another forever. What went wrong?

In a word, what went wrong is *sin* and not dealing properly with that sin. Relationships can be the source either of our deepest joy in life or of our deepest pain, depending on whether we follow God's directives on how to work through relational problems. The second greatest commandment in the Bible is to love our neighbor. Thus the Bible is filled with counsel on how to love one another. In our text, Jesus is saying,

We should be on guard against relational sins and we should deal with them biblically when they occur.

It is not easy to trace the flow of thought in Luke 17:1-10 and to tie it in with the preceding chapter. Many commentators think that Luke has just strung together here four somewhat disconnected teachings of Jesus on the subjects of stumbling-blocks, relationships, faith, and service. But I think that, although somewhat subtle, there is a flow of thought. Having just dealt with the Pharisees and their religious hypocrisy, Jesus now turns to the disciples with a corrective warning. The false teaching and self-centered, superficial religion of the Pharisees would inevitably cause many of the sinners who had recently turned to Christ (15:1) to stumble in their new faith. Thus Jesus warns about the seriousness of causing

one of these new believers to stumble (17:1-2) and gives instructions on how to deal with relational problems (17:3-4). The disciples sense the difficulty of following Jesus' instruction and thus ask Him to increase their faith. Jesus responds that the amount of faith isn't really the issue, since a small amount of faith will accomplish great things (17:5-6). The real issue is adopting the proper attitude as a servant and not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think (17:7-10).

Thus the verses we are studying today warn us to be on guard against committing relational sins and show us how to deal with such sins in a biblical manner when they do occur.

1. Be on guard against committing relational sins (17:1-3a).

The Greek word translated "stumbling-block" originally referred to the bait-stick in a trap. When an animal hit the bait stick, it triggered the trap, ensnaring the animal. It came to refer spiritually to any enticement to sin, especially to a serious sin that led to a defection of faith. This might be behavior that would cause a weaker Christian to fall into sin (Rom. 14:13), or false teaching that subtly turned the unsuspecting away from the truth (Rom. 16:17). To put a stumbling-block in someone's way is to do or say something that causes another person to trip or get off the path of following the Lord.

When Jesus refers to "these little ones," He probably means the new believers from among the sinners and tax-gatherers (15:1) who were coming to Him. The phrase, "little ones," pictures them as God's little children, showing His tender concern for their well-being. Just as parents want to guard their children from people who would harm them, so God is concerned that His babes not be hurt by those who claim to be Christians, but who set a bad example. While each person, including the new believer, is responsible for his own sin, there is a sense in which those who are more mature in the faith bear responsibility for the babes in the faith. Thus Jesus warns the disciples, "Be on your guard!" (17:3a; this warning seems to fit better with what goes before than with what follows).

- A. We need to guard against relational sins because we are so prone toward them.

Jesus said, "It is inevitable that stumbling-blocks come." We live as sinners in a sinful world, and so we are prone to sin against others and they are prone to sin against us. But just because we're all prone to sin, it does not follow that we should just go with the flow. Rather, we should do all that we can to avoid sinning against others and leading them into sin. And, we should do all that we can to avoid taking offense when others sin against us and to avoid being led into sin by the bad example or teaching of others.

The major reason that we are so prone to sin against others and to take offense when others sin against us is that our sinfulness prompts us to justify ourselves and to blame others. As soon as Adam fell into sin, he blamed his wife for leading him into it and he even subtly blamed God for giving him his wife (Gen. 3:12)! Ever since, we all play the blame game. If you don't think that this tendency is inherent in the human heart, you have not raised children! They do not have to be taught to pin the blame on their brother or sister. It comes naturally!

I read of a family that bought a parrot. For weeks they tried in vain to teach it to say things like, "You're the greatest!" The husband tried to teach it, "Give this guy a raise." The mom tried, "Clean your room." Nothing. Then one night while the family was eating dinner, the bird started talking, repeating what it had heard the most: "He did it. No, *he* did it!" Then, "Get out of my room!" (*Reader's Digest* [8/99], p. 29).

When Jesus warns, "Be on guard," He means that each of us needs to look first and foremost to our own hearts. Take the log out of your own eye and *then* you may be able to help your brother with the speck in his eye, but not before then (Matt. 7:3-5). When relational conflicts erupt, the first thing you should do is to ask God to show you what part *you* are responsible for. If you think that, being generous, you're responsible for ten percent of the problem, you can safely multiply that number by four or five! We all are prone to justify ourselves and blame others. But healing will not begin in damaged relationships until each person allows the Spirit of God through the Word of God to shine into his or her own heart and reveal the sin that is there. We must be on guard against relational sins because we are so prone towards them.

B. We need to guard against relational sins because God views them so seriously.

Jesus says that it would be better to suffer a Mafia-style death, having a heavy millstone hung around your neck and being cast into the sea, than to cause one of these little ones to stumble! He is *not* saying that the penalty for causing a little one to stumble is to have a millstone hung around your neck and to be cast into the sea. That would be *far better* than the penalty that God will impose!

This does not mean that Christians who cause someone else to stumble will lose their salvation and incur God's eternal wrath. If that were so, none could be saved, because we all have sinned in this manner. David sinned in this manner when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed, causing the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme (2 Sam. 12:14). Peter sinned in this manner when he fell into hypocrisy out of fear of the Judaizers, so that other Jewish believers and even Barnabas joined him in hypocrisy (Gal. 2:12-13). But both men repented of their sin and experienced God's forgiveness. Indeed, the mark of a true believer is that when he sins and leads a weaker believer into sin, he confesses that sin and does everything he can to help restore the fallen brother or sister. If the professing Christian does not repent, there may be good cause for questioning the genuineness of his faith.

Jesus uses this graphic picture to show how serious relational sins are in God's sight. His warning ought to scare us all into taking our offenses against others seriously. In Matthew 5:23-24 He says, "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." In other words, our relational sins hinder our worship!

Jesus' warning especially ought to scare those of us in positions of church leadership. I once heard Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, say that he often has prayed that God would take his life before he ever would be unfaithful to his wife. That would be a good thing for every Christian leader to pray. We must be on guard because we're prone to sin and because God takes relational sins so seriously.

Thankfully, the way of repentance and forgiveness is always available. Thus Jesus goes on to instruct us what to do when someone sins against us:

2. Deal biblically with relational sins when they occur: rebuke, repentance, and forgiveness (17:3b-4).

A. If your brother sins, rebuke him.

In my experience of helping people work through relational conflicts, this step is often neglected completely out of cowardice or done poorly at best. People would sooner walk away from a strained relationship than to give biblical rebuke to the person who is sinning against them or against others. Or, quite often if someone sins against us, we go and tell others about it, "just so they can pray about it" or "to get their counsel." Sure! Jesus clearly says, "If your brother sins (against you is implied), rebuke him."

Let's face it, it's not pleasant to have to rebuke someone. If you find it pleasant, you are not in the right frame of mind to do it and you will probably do it in an ungodly manner! But the command to rebuke a sinning brother is the first step in the restoration process. You are not dealing with him biblically until you do it.

This does not mean that we are to go around rebuking others for every minor offense. Often, both in the church and in our families, we should act "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love (Eph. 4:2). "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). "We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves" (Rom. 15:1). Thus much of the time we should simply absorb offences and pray for the offender, that he will grow up in the Lord and learn to be more sensitive to others. God has shown us grace; we should show grace to others.

So, how do we know when to bear with someone's sin and when to rebuke it? There are several things to consider (see Ken Sande's excellent book, *The Peacemaker* [Baker], pp. 135-140):

First, *are you aware that the offender has something against you?* If so, Jesus commands us to go to him and seek to get the matter cleared up (Matt. 5:23-24). We can't shrug it off by saying, "That's his problem!" Scripture repeatedly tells us to *pursue* peace with others (Rom. 12:18; 14:19; 2 Tim. 2:22; Heb. 12:14). In other words, we

are not to be passive about strained relationships. To be apathetic is not to love the other person. We should ardently go after peace.

Second, *is the other person's sin bringing dishonor to God?* If someone who professes to be a Christian is acting in a way that brings shame to the name of Christ, and you know the person and are aware of his behavior, you're it! You need to go and talk to him about his sin in an attempt to bring him to repentance. To let it go is not to care about the Lord's glory or your brother's holiness.

Third, *is the other person's sin damaging your relationship with him (or her)?* Perhaps the other person habitually gossips about others, so that you find yourself wanting to avoid being around her (or him). You don't have to become best of friends, but the loving thing to do is not to avoid her, but to attempt to help her face up to her sin and repent. Or, perhaps the person said or did something that hurt you, so that you find yourself dodging him every time you see him. Again, the loving thing to do is to meet privately and confront what he did so that you help him grow as a believer.

Fourth, *is the other person's sin seriously hurting others?* Perhaps you see a young mother who verbally or physically abuses her children. Or it maybe a professing Christian is ensnared in drug or alcohol abuse, along with the inevitable deception that accompanies those sins. You are not showing God's love to let the person go on in this destructive behavior. You must rebuke with the view of leading the person to repentance.

Fifth, *is the other person's sin seriously hurting himself?* If you see a Christian engaging in some sin that is going to destroy him and you shrug and say, "That's his problem," you are not loving your brother. As James 5:19-20 says, "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back; let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins."

Finally, *is the person's sin an often repeated pattern?* If a person does the same thing over and over, he is enslaved to that sin and needs help getting out of it. Anger, lust, greed, selfishness, insensitivity to others, laziness or a lack of self-discipline, and many other sins can destroy a person's faith if he does not get the victory in

Christ. If you see these habit patterns, you need to come alongside and offer help in the Lord.

Do not go to rebuke another believer until you first have examined yourself and taken the log out of your own eye. Check your motives before God, to make sure that your desire is to do His will. Pray for the other person's openness and for the right timing to go. Prepare yourself to act in love even if the other person attacks you. But then, be obedient to God's Word and go. It is always more difficult at the moment to go than to let it go. But biblical love demands that we put out the effort.

B. The goal of rebuke is repentance.

The goal of rebuking another believer is *not* "to get it off your chest." It is *not* "to give him a piece of your mind." It is *not* to prove that you're right and he's wrong. It is *not* to win so that next time you have some ammunition to use in the heat of battle. The goal is to bring your brother to repentance, to restore his relationship with the Lord, with you, and with others. Until you have that goal clearly in mind, you are not ready to rebuke your brother.

In Galatians 6:1, Paul instructs, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted." The word "restore" was used of mending torn nets and of putting a bone that is out of joint back into the socket, so that healing could take place. The idea is to restore the person to usefulness to the Lord. The prerequisite is to make sure that you are spiritual (under the Spirit's control), that you go in gentleness, and that you humbly be on guard so that you don't fall into sin.

I should add that it may be that your brother did not *knowingly* sin against you, but rather that there was a misunderstanding. Thus rather than going to him with your gun cocked, you should go with a tentative attitude of trying to discover the facts. Ask a lot of questions before you do any confronting.

A man told how he was supposed to bring some chairs to a home Bible study, but he had a busy day and forgot. When he arrived without the chairs, the host exclaimed, "That figures!" As he went to get the chairs, the man who forgot thought, "What did he mean by saying, 'That figures'? Does he think I'm stupid or what?"

So, he later asked the host what he had meant. The host laughed and said, "Oh, it had nothing to do with you. It's just that everything had gone wrong for me today, and it was just one more thing." By asking for clarification, the man cleared up what could have damaged their relationship.

C. The response to repentance is forgiveness.

If your brother repents, forgive him. Then Jesus adds, "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." Certainly, after seven times in the same day, you might be inclined to question the man's sincerity! And, Jesus does not mean that the eighth time you need not forgive. He means, forgive as often as your brother repents. While you may need to talk to him about the repetition of the problem and about the sincerity of his repentance, I think that Jesus puts it like this to say, "Go overboard on forgiveness. If there is even a hint that your brother is repentant, don't question his motives. Just forgive and forgive and forgive again."

Biblical forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling. It is to dismiss the case from court. The word means to let go or release. When you forgive, you choose to let the matter drop and you promise not to bring it up against the person in the future. Biblical forgiveness does not say, "I forgive you but I never want to see your stinking face again!" Biblical forgiveness opens the way to restore wounded relationships. Reconciliation is the goal of forgiveness.

While biblical forgiveness is a quick decision, the restoration of trust usually takes time proportionate to the seriousness of the offense. If a man molests your children and truly repents, you must forgive him, but you would be foolish to let him babysit your children. Trust is gradually restored as a person demonstrates growth in godliness. Also, granting forgiveness does not necessarily mean removing all of the consequences of the person's wrongful actions. God forgave David, but He imposed heavy consequences for his sin so that he and others would see the seriousness of what he had done (2 Sam. 12:14). Granting forgiveness may include graciously relieving the offender of some or all the consequences, but not necessarily so. As a boss, you may forgive a dishonest employee, and yet put him on probation or fire him.

Also, many wonder, "Should I forgive the person if he does not repent or if he only repents superficially?" Is forgiveness supposed to be unconditional? We are to forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). God does not pardon our sins until we repent, but He made provision to pardon our sins long before we repented and He acted in kindness toward us to lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Thus we must root out all bitterness toward the person who has sinned against us and genuinely seek his welfare by our attitudes, words, and actions. We should pray for his repentance. We should look for opportunities to do kind things for him. The minute he repents and asks our forgiveness, we should freely grant it. That's how God forgave us in Christ, bearing the penalty for our sin.

### Conclusion

Former First Lady, Barbara Bush, spoke these words at a college commencement:

As important as your obligation as a doctor, a lawyer, or a business leader will be, you are a human being first, and those human connections with spouses, with children, with friends are the most important investments you will ever make. At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, winning one more verdict, closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a child, a friend or a parent. Our success as a society depends not on what happens in the White House but on what happens inside your house. (*Reader's Digest* [1/91], pp. 157-158.)

Relationships are important to us. But even more so, they matter to God! That's why Jesus warns so strongly about being on guard against relational sins and emphasizes so strongly the need for rebuke, repentance, and forgiveness. If you have a strained relationship with a family member, a fellow Christian, or even with a non-Christian, I urge you, so far as it depends on you, to pursue peace and reconciliation. God will bless you as you seek to obey Him.

## Discussion Questions

1. How can we fight our inherent tendency to blame others?
2. In marriage, how can a husband and wife confront one another's sins without becoming adversaries?
3. Do we have any right to talk to someone else about a person's sin against us before we have talked to the person himself? If so, when and under what conditions?
4. What are some practical implications of the fact that forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling?
5. Discuss: Should we forgive a person who does not repent or who repents in a glib or superficial manner?

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