

SERVING EACH OTHER THROUGH FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER]

On both a theological and a practical level, forgiveness is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. True forgiveness comes at a cost and is pursued intentionally within a community of believers.

The new human community that the Bible requires cuts across all cultures and temperaments. Put another way, it doesn't fit any culture but challenges them all at some point. Christians from more individualistic cultures love the Bible's emphasis on affirming one another and sharing hurts and problems—but hate the idea of accountability and discipline. Christians from more traditional communal cultures love the emphasis on accountability for morals and beliefs but often chafe at emphasis on racial reconciliation and being open about one's personal hurts and financial needs.

But one could argue that the biblical teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation is so radical that there are no cultures or societies that are in accord with it. It may be here most of all that we see the truth of Bonhoeffer's statement, "Our community with one another [in Christ] consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. Christian brotherhood is a spiritual and not a human reality. In this it differs from all other communities."¹

In its most basic and simple form, this teaching is that *Christians in community are to never give up on one another, never give up on a relationship, and never write off another believer*. We must never tire of forgiving (and repenting!) and seeking to repair our relationships. Matthew 5:23–26 tells us we should go to someone if we know they have something against us. Matthew 18:15–20 says we should approach someone if we have something against *them*. In short, if any relationship has cooled off or has weakened in any way, *it is always your move*. It doesn't matter "who started it." God always holds you responsible to reach out to repair a tattered relationship. A Christian is responsible to begin the process of reconciliation, regardless of how the distance or the alienation began.

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS

When speaking of forgiveness, Jesus uses the image of *debts* to describe the nature of sins (Matt. 6:12; 18:21–35). When someone seriously wrongs you, there is an absolutely unavoidable sense that the wrongdoer *owes* you. The wrong has incurred an obligation, a liability, a debt. Anyone who has been wronged feels a compulsion to make the other person pay down that debt. We do that by hurting them, yelling at them, making them feel bad in some way, or just waiting and watching and hoping that something bad happens to them. Only after we see them suffer in some commensurate way do we sense that the debt has been paid and the sense of obligation is gone. This sense of debt/liability and obligation is impossible to escape. Anyone who denies it exists has simply not been wronged or sinned against in any serious way.

What then is forgiveness? Forgiveness means giving up the right to seek repayment from the one who harmed you. But it must be recognized that forgiveness is a *form of voluntary suffering*. What does that mean?

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper, 1954), 23, 25–26.

Think about how monetary debts work. If a friend breaks my lamp, and if the lamp costs fifty dollars to replace, then the act of lamp-breaking incurs a debt of fifty dollars. If I let him pay for and replace the lamp, I get my lamp back and he's out fifty dollars. But if I *forgive him* for what he did, the debt does not somehow vanish into thin air. When I forgive him, I absorb the cost and payment for the lamp: either I will pay the fifty dollars to replace it or I will lose the lighting in that room. To forgive is to cancel a debt by paying it or absorbing it yourself. Someone always pays every debt.

This is the case in all situations of wrongdoing, even when no money is involved. When you are sinned against, you lose some thing—perhaps happiness, reputation, peace of mind, a relationship, or an opportunity. There are two things to do about a sin. Imagine for example that someone has hurt your reputation. You can try to restore it by paying the other person back, voicing public criticisms and ruining *his or her* reputation. Or you can forgive the one who wronged you, refuse payback, and absorb the damage to your reputation. (You will have to restore it over time.)

In all cases when wrong is done there is a debt, and there is no way to deal with it without suffering: either you make the perpetrator suffer for it or you forgive and suffer for it yourself.

Forgiveness is always extremely costly. It is emotionally very expensive—it takes much blood, sweat, and tears. When you forgive, you pay the debt yourself in several ways.

First, you refuse to hurt the person directly; you refuse vengeance, payback, or the infliction of pain. Instead, you are as cordial as possible. When forgiving you must beware of subtle ways to try to exact payment while assuring yourself that you aren't. Here are specific things to avoid:

- + making cutting remarks and dragging out past injuries repeatedly
- + being far more demanding and controlling with the person than you are with others, all because you feel deep down that they still owe you
- + punishing them with self-righteous "mercy" that is really a way to make them feel small and to justify yourself
- + avoiding them or being cold toward them

Second, you refuse to employ innuendo or "spin" or hint or gossip or direct slander to diminish those who have hurt you in the eyes of others. You don't run them down under the guise of warning people about them or under the guise of seeking sympathy and support and sharing your hurt.

Third, when forgiving you refuse to indulge in ill-will in your heart. That is, don't continually replay the tapes of the wrong in your imagination, in order to keep the sense of loss and hurt fresh so you can stay actively hostile toward the person and feel virtuous by contrast. Don't vilify or demonize the offender in your imagination. Rather, recognize the common sinful humanity you share with him or her. Don't root for them to fail, don't hope for their pain. Instead, pray positively for their growth.

Forgiveness, then, is granted before it is felt. It is a promise to refrain from the three things above and pray for the perpetrator as you remind yourself of God's grace to you. Though it is extremely difficult and painful (you are bearing the cost of the sin yourself!), forgiveness will deepen your character, free you to talk to and help the person, and lead to love and peace rather than bitterness.

Further, by bearing the cost of the sin, you are walking in the path of your Master (Matt. 18:21–35; Col. 3:13). It is typical for non-Christians today to say that the cross of Christ makes no sense. "Why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God just forgive us?" Actually *no one* who has been deeply wronged "*just* forgives"! If someone wrongs you, there are only two options: (1) you make them suffer, or (2) you refuse revenge and forgive them and then you suffer. And if we can't forgive without suffering, how much more must God suffer in order to forgive us? If we unavoidably sense the obligation and debt and injustice of sin in our soul, how much more does God know it? On the cross we see God forgiving us, and that was possible only if God suffered. On the cross God's love satisfied his own justice by suffering, bearing the penalty for sin. There is never forgiveness without suffering, nails, thorns, sweat, blood. Never.

WHAT WE NEED TO FORGIVE

The experience of the gospel gives us the two prerequisites for a life of forgiveness: emotional humility and emotional wealth.

You can remain bitter toward someone only if you feel superior, if you are sure that you “would never do anything like that!” To remain unforgiving means you are unaware of your own sinfulness and need for forgiveness. When Paul says he is the worst among sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), he is not exaggerating. He is saying that he is as capable of sin as the worst criminals are. The gospel has equipped him with emotional humility.

At the same time, you can't be gracious to someone if you are too needy and insecure. If you know God's love and forgiveness, then there is a limit to how deeply another person can hurt you. He or she can't touch your real identity, wealth, and significance. The more you rejoice in your own forgiveness, the quicker you will be to forgive others. You are rooted in emotional wealth.

Forgiveness founders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion—without transposing the enemy from the sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to rediscover that person's humanity and imitate God's love for him. And when one knows that God's love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself . . . and so rediscover one's own sinfulness.²

Jesus says, “If you do not forgive men their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:15). This does not mean we can earn God's forgiveness through our own forgiving but that we can disqualify ourselves from it. No heart that is truly repentant toward God could be unforgiving toward others. A lack of forgiveness toward others is the direct result of a lack of repentance toward God. And as we know, you must repent in order to be saved (Acts 2:38).

GOD'S FORGIVENESS AND OURS

When God reveals his glory to Moses, he says he forgives wickedness yet “does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Exod. 34:6–7). Not until the coming of Jesus do we see how God can be both completely just and forgiving through his atonement (1 John 1:7–9). In the cross God satisfies both justice and love. God was so just and desirous to judge sin that Jesus had to die, but he was so loving and desirous of our salvation that Jesus was glad to die.

We too are *commanded* to forgive (“bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another,” Col 3:13–14) on the basis of Jesus' atonement for our sins (“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . . If you do not forgive men their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive your sins,” Matt. 6:14–15; cf. Luke 6:37). But we are also required to forgive in a way that honors justice, just as God's forgiveness does. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). “Christians are called to abandon bitterness, to be forbearing, to have a forgiving stance even where the repentance of the offending party is conspicuous by its absence; on the other hand, their God-centered passion for justice, their concern for God's glory, ensure that the awful odium of sin is not glossed over.”³

PURSUING TRUTH, LOVE, AND RELATIONSHIP

The gospel calls us, then, to keep an equal concern (a) to speak the truth and honor what is right, yet (b) to be endlessly forgiving as we do so and (c) to never give up on the goal of a reconciled, warm relationship.

2. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 124.

3. D. A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002), p. 83.

First, God requires forgiveness whether or not the offender has repented and has asked for forgiveness. “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him” (Mark 11:25). This does not say “forgive him *if he repents*” but rather “forgive him right there—as you are praying.”

Second, God requires speaking the truth. That is why Jesus tells his disciples in Luke 17:3 to “rebuke” the wrongdoer and “if he repents, forgive him.” Is Jesus saying that we can hold a grudge if the person doesn’t repent? No, we must not read Luke 17 to contradict Mark 11. Jesus is calling us here *both* to practice inner forgiveness *and* to rebuke and correct. We must completely surrender the right to pay back or get even, yet at the same time we must never overlook injustice and must require serious wrongdoings to be redressed.

This is almost the very opposite of how we ordinarily operate. Ordinarily we do not seek justice on the outside (we don’t confront or call people to change and make restitution), but we stay hateful and bitter on the inside. The Bible calls us to turn this completely around. We are to deeply forgive on the inside so as to have no desire for vengeance, but then we are to speak openly about what has happened with a desire to help the person see what was done wrong.

In reality, inner forgiveness and outward correction work well together. Only if you have forgiven inside can you correct unabusively—without trying to make the person feel terrible. Only if you have forgiven already can your motive be to correct the person for God’s sake, for justice’s sake, for the community’s sake, and for the person’s sake. And only if you forgive on the inside will your words have any hope of changing the perpetrator’s heart. Otherwise your speech will be so filled with disdain and hostility that he or she will not listen to you.

Ultimately, to forgive on the inside and to rebuke/correct on the outside are not incompatible, because they are both acts of love. It is never loving to let a person just get away with sin. It is not loving to the perpetrator, who continues in the grip of the habit, nor to those who will be wronged in the future, nor to God, who is grieved. This is difficult, for the line is very thin between a moral outrage for God’s sake and a self-righteous outrage because of hurt pride. Still, to refuse to confront is not loving but just selfish.

Third, as we “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15), we are to pursue justice gently and humbly, in order to redress wrongs and yet maintain or restore the relationship (Gal. 6:1–5). There is a great deal of tension between these three things! Almost always one is much more easily attained if you simply drop any concern for the other two. For example, it is easy to “speak the truth” if you’ve given up on any desire to maintain a warm relationship. But if you want both, you will have to be extremely careful with how you speak the truth! Another example: it is possible to convince yourself that you have forgiven someone, but if afterward you still want nothing to do with them (you don’t pursue an ongoing relationship), then that is a sign that you spoke the truth without truly forgiving.

Of course it is possible that you do keep these three things together in your heart and mind but the other person simply cannot. There is no culture or personality type that holds these together. People tend to believe that if you are confronting me you don’t forgive or love me, or if you really loved me you wouldn’t be rebuking me. God recognizes that many people simply won’t let you pursue all these things together, and so tells us, “As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom. 12:18). That is, do your part and have as good and peaceful a relationship with people as they will let you have.

WHEN DO WE NEED TO CONFRONT AND RECONCILE?

Jesus tells us that if we have been sinned against we may need to go and speak to the offender. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). But *when* do we “rebuke”—every time anyone wrongs us? First Peter 4:8 says famously that “love covers over a multitude of sins,” and Proverbs 10:12 backs this up. This means we are not to be thin-skinned, and it would be wrong to bring up every matter every time we have been treated unjustly or insensitively. Still, passages like Matthew 18 and Luke 17 say there are some times in which we should make a complaint. When do we do so?

This is where Galatians 6 gives us guidance. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (6:1). We should give correction under two conditions.

First, we should correct when the sin is serious enough to cool off or rupture the relationship. Matthew 18:15 indicates that the purpose of a rebuke is to “win your brother over”—that is, to rescue the relationship. That is implied when Galatians 6:2 tells us that correcting someone is a way of “carrying each other’s burdens;” it is an expression of an interdependent relationship.

Second, we should correct when the sin against us is evidently part of a pattern of behavior that the other person is seriously stuck in. “If someone is *caught in* a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him” (Gal. 6:1): the image is of being trapped in a pattern of behavior that will be harmful to the person and to others. In love this should be pointed out. So we rebuke for the person’s sake—to “restore him.” Our concern is his or her growth.

And how do we do it? “You who are spiritual should restore him *gently*” (Gal. 6:1). This is essential. If the motive of the correction is helping the other to grow, then we will be loving and gentle. Verses 2–3 indicate that we should do this very humbly. We are making ourselves servants by doing the correction.

Ultimately, any love that is afraid to confront the beloved is really not love but a selfish desire to *be* loved. Cowardice is always selfish, putting your own needs ahead of the needs of the other. A love that says, “I’ll do *anything* to keep him or her loving and approving of me!” is not real love at all. It is not loving the person; it is loving the love you get from the person. True love is willing to confront, even to “lose” the beloved in the short run if there is a chance to help him or her.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there are plenty of times we should not correct and not seek an apology even when one is owed. The stronger a Christian you are, the less sensitive and easily hurt you will be. When people “zing” you, snub you, ignore you, or let you down in some way, it should not immediately cool you to them. As a mature Christian, you immediately remember (a) times you did the same thing to others or (b) times that people who did this to you were later revealed to have a lot on their mind and heart. If you find that any wrongdoing immediately cools you to another and you want to insist on your right to an apology, do some self-examination regarding the level of your emotional humility and emotional wealth in Christ. Love should cover a multitude of sins (that is, most of them!) You should be able to warmly treat people who by rights owe you an apology but whom you haven’t corrected because the slights were rather minor, or the time isn’t right to speak about it, or you don’t know them well enough to be sure it is a major pattern in their life.

HOW DO WE RECONCILE?

Here are some basics.

WHAT ARE THE MARKS OF AN UNRECONCILED RELATIONSHIP?

An unreconciled relationship is marked by avoidance, coldness, and irritability (that is, the same action performed by another person does not disturb you as much as it does when *this* person does it!) If you find yourself avoiding, being cold toward, or being very irritated with someone (or if you can tell that someone is cold or irritable toward you or avoiding you), then you probably have an unreconciled relationship.

On the other hand, “I forgive you” does *not* mean “I trust you.” Some people think they haven’t reconciled until they can completely trust the person who did the wrong. That is not the case. Forgiveness means a willingness to try to reestablish trust, but that reestablishment is always a process. The speed and degree of this restoration entail the re-creation of trust, and that takes time, depending on the nature and severity of the offenses involved. Until a person shows evidence of true change, we *should not* trust him or her. To immediately give one’s trust to a person with sinful habits could actually be enabling him to sin. Trust must be restored, and the speed at which this occurs depends on the behavior.

This also applies to the people who owe you an apology but whose sins have been “covered” (see above). A person who has let you down but whom you don’t correct has damaged your trust, albeit in minor ways. If he or she comes to apologize, it will restore the level of trust and respect you had before, but until that happens you can still have a civil and cordial relationship with them.

HOW CAN YOU RECONCILE WITH SOMEONE?

We can look at Matthew 5 and Matthew 18 as two different approaches: Matthew 5 lays out what you do when you believe you have wronged someone else, while Matthew 18 is what you do when you believe someone has wronged you. But it is also possible to also look at these passages as giving us two stages of the normal reconciliation process, because seldom does just one party bear all the blame for a frayed relationship. Almost always reconciliation involves *both* repenting *and* forgiving—both admitting your own wrong and pointing out the wrong of the other. If we put these two approaches together, we can create a practical outline like the one that follows.

Stage 1

Begin by confessing anything you may have done wrong (this might be called the “Matthew 5:24 phase”). Begin with yourself. Even if you believe that your own behavior is no more than 5 percent of the problem, start with your 5 percent! Look for what you have done wrong, and collect the criticism.

List whatever you think you have done wrong and ask the other person to add to the list of things you have done wrong or ways you have contributed to the breakdown in the relationship. Example: “I’m here because I don’t like what has happened to our relationship [*or—if the term applies*—our friendship]. It appears to me that there is a problem between us; am I wrong?” Then, “Here is what I believe I have contributed to the problem between us—where I’ve wronged you. . . . But where else have I wronged you or contributed to the relationship problem, in your estimation?”

If you are almost totally in the dark about what went wrong, you may have to simply offer to listen. Example: “It appears to me that there is trouble between us and I have offended you. Am I right? Please tell me specific ways I have wronged you. I am ready to listen—honest.”

Then listen well to the criticism you’ve invited. Seek to distill this criticism into something clear and specific. To do so too quickly may seem defensive, but eventually ask for as many specific examples as possible. If the other says, “You are bullying,” you need to find out what actual words or actions or tones of voice strike the other person as “bullying.”

Here is a practical checklist:

- + Pray silently, asking God to give you wisdom and allow you to sense his love for you.
- + Assume that God is speaking to you through this painful situation and is showing you ways you should be more careful or change.
- + Assume that God is speaking to you even through a very flawed person.
- + Beware of being defensive. Don’t explain yourself too quickly, even if you have a good answer or can show the person that he or she was mistaken. Be sure you don’t interrupt or keep the other from expressing frustration. Show sympathy even if you were misunderstood.
- + Always ask, “Is there anything else? I really want to know!” In a stressful situation it is natural for the other to hold back some complaints or concerns. Get them all out on the table, or you’ll have to do this again!
- + Make it safe to criticize you: support individual criticisms with “That must have been hard; I see why you were concerned.”

- + Look for needs in the critic that may underlie the criticism.
- + Now respond to the criticism, by doing either or both of the following:
 1. “Please, forgive me for _____.” This is your repentance, your confession of sin.
 - Admit your wrong without excuses and without blaming the circumstances. Even if the criticism included exaggerations, extract the real fault and confess it. Even if only 10 percent of the relationship problem is you, admit it.
 - Don’t just apologize; ask for forgiveness.
 - If you can think of a plan for changing your behavior, say, “Here is what I will do to make sure not do such a thing again in the future.” Ask if there is anything you can do to restore trust. If you really cannot see any validity in any of the criticism, ask whether you can get back to the person later, after checking with others.
 - Avoid overstatements—“How terrible I feel over what I’ve done!” Such confessions may be mainly a painful catharsis designed to relieve one of guilt feelings through a kind of atonement/punishment, or to get others to provide lots of sympathy.
 - On the other hand, avoid being deadpan, lighthearted, or even flip. Such confessions may aim to preserve pride, merely to fulfill a requirement, to force the other person to let you off the hook but without showing any real contrition or emotional regret at all.
 - Most of all, do not make a confession that is really an attack. “If I upset you, I am sorry” falls in this category. It means, “If you were a normal person, you would not have been upset by what I did.” Do not repent to the person of something that you are not going to repent to God for nor take concrete steps to change.
 - Real repentance has three aspects: confession to God, confession to the person wronged, and offering a concrete plan for change so as to avoid the sin in the future (see Luke 3:7–14).
 2. After you have repented, then turn to those issues that involve no sin on your part (as far as you can tell) and about which you have to say, “Please, accept my explanation for _____.”
 - “Here’s how I see it. Can you see my motive or meaning was very different from what you inferred?”
 - “Can you understand my point of view? Can you accept that I could have perceived this very differently and had the motives I am describing?”
 - “Is there some way, though we see this issue so differently, that we can avoid hurting each other like this again?”

Stage #2

Now (if necessary) address any ways that the other person has wronged you (“Matthew 18 phase”). If you have done all of the above, you may well find that this approach elicits a confession from the other without your having to ask for it! This is far and away the best way to get reconciliation.

However, if the other person is not forthcoming, begin with: “From my point of view, it looks as if you did _____. It affected me this way: _____. I think it would be far better for all concerned if instead you did this: _____. But my understanding may be inaccurate or distorted. Correct me if I am wrong. Could you explain what happened?” Be sure your list of things the other person has done is specific, not vague.

If the other person offers an apology, grant forgiveness—but avoid using the term unless forgiveness is asked for! Otherwise to say “I forgive you” may sound tremendously humiliating. Alternative ways to express forgiveness might be “Well, I won’t hold this against you,” “Let’s put that in the past now,” or “Think no more of it.”

Here are some general guidelines for this part of the process:

- + Maintain a loving and humble tone. Tone of voice is extremely important. Overly controlled, nice, and calm may sound patronizing and be infuriating. Don't resort to flattery or fawning syrupiness or fall into abusive or angry tones.
- + Attack the problem, not the person. For example, don't say, "You are so thoughtless"; rather, you might say, "You have forgotten this after making repeated promises that you would not."
- + Suggest solutions and alternative courses of action or behavior. Make sure all criticism is specific and constructive. Never say, "Don't do this" without saying, "Instead do this."
- + In the heart of the discussion, you may discover some other underlying goal or need that the other person is trying to meet that could be met in more constructive ways.
- + Keep in mind differences in culture. A person from a different culture may consider your approach incredibly disrespectful and demeaning when you think you are being respectful.

What if the other person won't be reconciled to you?

First, some thoughts on failed reconciliation with a non-Christian. Christians are commanded to seek peace and reconciliation with all people (Rom. 12:18; Heb. 12:14), not just Christians. However, non-Christians may not feel the same responsibility to live in reconciled relationships. In general, you will find that non-Christians will not feel compelled to respond with forgiveness and repentance.

If that occurs, you must take what you are given. Romans 12:18–21 provides guidelines on how to stay gracious, kind, open, and cordial to persons who are being standoffish.⁴

What if a Christian from your church is resisting reconciliation? Matthew 18 indicates that if a fellow believer will not reconcile after repeated intentional efforts on your part, you should go to stage B—getting some other Christian friends (preferably including someone who is respected by the other person) to go along with you to reconcile the relationship. If that does not work, at stage C you "tell it to the church" and ask the elders to speak to the person.

If the person with whom you are seeking reconciliation is a Christian but lives in another region or attends another church, you should take the Matthew 18:15–20 process as far as you can. However, if you are not members of the same church it may not be possible to go to the final step of "telling it to the church." Again, you may have to take what you are given and deal as cordially and as graciously as possible with someone who is not reconciled to you.

More generally, learn to accept the apologies and repentances you get without demanding that people admit more than they honestly believe. If they repent nearly as extensively as you feel they should, then the relationship can be almost what it was before. If they only go halfway, then you are still better off, though the relationship is weakened because you don't fully trust their wisdom and self-knowledge.

It is usually hardest to forgive someone who will not admit any wrong and who stays haughty. Internal forgiveness may be a longer process. Use all the spiritual resources we have in our faith:

- + Look at God's commands to forgive—it is our obligation.
- + Remember God's forgiveness of us. We have no right to be bitter.
- + Remember that God's omniscience is necessary to be a just judge. We have insufficient knowledge to know what others deserve.
- + Remember that when we allow the evil to keep us in bondage through bitterness, we are being defeated by evil! Romans 12 tells us to "overcome" or *defeat* evil with forgiveness.
- + Remember that we undermine the glory of the gospel in the world's eyes when we fail to forgive.

4. A great book on relating to people who are cold or even hostile is *Bold Love* by Dan Allender and Temper Longman (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992). Don't miss it.

WATCHING FROM THE SIDELINES

When two people within the church are in conflict with each other, it can wreak a lot of havoc in the hearts and lives of the Christians around them who are not immediately involved in the dispute. The worst thing (but the common thing!) that happens is that rather than suspending judgment, praying, and encouraging the parties toward reconciliation, people take sides in the dispute in a very world-typical way. It is hard not to sympathize with the party you know best. It is also hard for that person not to “share” his or her hurt with you in a way that does not vilify the other party in the conflict.

As a result, we can have second- and third-order unreconciled relationships. That is, we feel alienated from people who are friends of the person our friend is alienated from! The problem with this is obvious—there is no direct way to heal such breaches. If someone is avoiding you because your friend is mad at his or her friend, there is no “wrong” that you can confess or repent for. It is a spiritually poisonous situation. The problem is not that you have sinned or have been sinned against, but you have heard a bad report about another Christian and you let it come into your own heart and take root as distrust and hostility.

What should we do? First, see what James says about passing along bad reports: “Humble yourselves before the Lord. Brothers, don’t slander or attack one another” (James 4:10–11). The verb *slander* simply means to “speak against” (*kata-lalein*). It is not necessarily a false report, just an “against-report”—one that undermines the listener’s respect and love for the person being spoken about. “As a north wind brings rain, so a sly tongue brings angry looks” (Prov. 25:23). James’s linking of slander with pride (4:10) shows that slander is not a humble evaluation of error or fault, which we must constantly be doing. Rather, the slandering person speaks as if he or she never would do the same thing himself. Nonslandering evaluation is gentle and guarded, and it’s always evident that the speaker is aware of sharing the same frailty, humanity, and sinful nature with the one being criticized. It involves a profound awareness of one’s own sin. It is never “against-speaking.”

“Don’t grumble [literally, don’t groan and roll your eyes] against each other” (James 5:9). Here James refers to a kind of against-speaking that is less specific than a focused slander or attack. It is hinting with not only words but also body language—shaking one’s head, rolling eyes, and reinforcing an erosion of love and respect for someone else (“You know how they do things around here!”) But it accomplishes the same thing. It brings “angry looks;” it undermines love and respect.

Second, see what the book of Proverbs says about receiving bad reports: “He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.” (Prov. 17:9) The first thing to do when hearing or seeing something negative is to seek to “cover” the offense rather than speak about it to others. That is, rather than letting it in, you should seek to keep the matter from destroying your love and regard for a person. How?

- + *Remember your own sinfulness.* “All a man’s ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD” (Prov. 16:2). Your motives are never as pure as you think they are. To know your sinfulness automatically keeps you from being too sure of your position and from speaking too strongly against people on the other side of a conflict. You realize that you may not be seeing things well.
- + *Remember that there is always another side.* “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him” (Prov. 18:17). You never have all the facts. You are never in a position to have the whole picture, and therefore when you hear the first negative report, you should assume that you have far too little information to draw a conclusion.

What if the injustice seems too great or grievous for you to ignore? In Derek Kidner’s commentary on Proverbs 25:8–10, he writes that when we think someone has done wrong, we should remember that “one seldom knows the full facts, or interprets them perfectly (v. 8); and one’s motives in spreading a story are seldom as pure as one pretends (v. 10). To run to the law or to the neighbors is usually to run away from the duty of personal

relationship—see Christ’s clinching comment in Matthew 18:15b.⁵ In short, if you feel the problem is so great that it threatens to destroy your regard for the person, you must go to him or her personally before you go to anyone else.

When might this be necessary? Galatians 6:1 says we are to go to someone if they are “caught in a sin.” That means some pattern of negative behavior is involved. Don’t go the first time you see or hear of someone doing wrong. When you do go, remember the principles of gentleness and persistence from Galatians 6 and Matthew 18. The purpose is restoration of relationship.

If you hear a bad report about another Christian, you must *either cover it with love or go to him or her directly before speaking of it to any others*. The first thing to do is to simply suspend judgment. The second thing to do is “cover” it in love. The last thing to do is go and speak to the reported offender personally. What you should never do is withdraw from them or pass the negative report on to others.

CONCLUSION

Unreconciled relationships within the church are inevitable *because* the church is such a wonderful, supernaturally created community!

The reason there are so many exhortations in the New Testament for Christians to love other Christians is because . . . the church itself is not made up of natural “friends.” It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort [that bind most other groups of people together]. Christians come together not because they form a natural collocation, but because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance. In this light we are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus’ sake. That is the only reason why John 13:34–35 makes sense when Jesus says: “A new command I give you—Love one another as I have loved you.” . . . Christian love will stand out and bear witness to Jesus because it is a display, for Jesus’ sake, of mutual love among social incompatibles.⁶

The reason we will *have* to hold ourselves accountable for our relationships is that mutual love in Christian community is super-hard. Jesus has brought incompatibles together! But the reason we will *want* to hold ourselves accountable for our relationships is that mutual love in Christian community is one of the main ways the world will see who Jesus is. So we must never give up on each other. So we must pursue each other in love.

Copyright © 2005 by Timothy Keller, © 2009 by Redeemer City to City. This article first appeared in The Gospel and Life conferences of 2004 and 2005.

We encourage you to use and share this material freely—but please don’t charge money for it, change the wording, or remove the copyright information.

5. Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 157.

6. Carson, p. 61.