

Confronting Sin

The goal is restoration, not accusation.

by Mark R. Littleton *Discipleship Journal* Issue #44 March/April 1988

AS I WALKED up the sidewalk to my friend's house, my pounding heart seemed nearly deafening. My mouth I was dry. My mind raced. My legs quivered, ready to buckle. Something inside me kept saying, *Let it go. Just forget about it. It's nothing. You'll only make him angry.*

Three times I stopped and stared at the square panel of light in his window. He knew I was coming over. But he didn't know why.

I was coming to talk to him about sin. His sin, which was drinking to excess and trying to hide it from our congregation, was something I'd hoped for months he would overcome. But his wife had told me, "He's getting drunk nearly every day now."

He was a good friend. Nearly a year before I'd shared the gospel with him and he had trusted Jesus. I'd been discipling him, meeting several mornings a week with him and his wife to have a "quiet time." But that had stopped. And the drinking had started all over again. When I'd spoken with him on several occasions, he'd been resistant, saying, "It's no problem." Or, "I have a hold on it." But it had a hold on him.

Finally, I knocked on his door.

WITH A SIGN OF PEACE

Talking to a Christian about personal sin is not easy. Words like *confrontation* and *altercation* zip into our minds, perhaps from previous encounters. But the Scriptures call it *restoration* (Gal. 6:1). It means speaking to someone about behavior that the Scriptures clearly teach is wrong. Biblical restoration always involves tact, love, compassion, and understanding. It's not coming with a hammer or a sword, but with a handshake and a sign of peace.

Such attempts at restoration never need to be heated or even unfriendly, though they can become that way. I've participated in many that were received with joy. Paul, the great restorer, wrote most of his letters to head off or clear up problems in his churches. Jesus repeatedly told His disciples and others about the need to repent of sin.

Yet, we can almost see Jesus delivering rebuke with tears in His eyes; and as Paul writes, we can almost hear his choking breath as he penned words of fire and life. For them, such restoration was not fun. But it was necessary.

Mind you, we're not talking about pointing out every little thing people do that we disagree with. This isn't a "search and destroy mission" that hunts down every trace of evil.

For instance, we're not talking about "gray areas," activities the Lord lets us decide about—going to movies, dancing, playing cards, smoking, even having a drink now and then. Scripture has not spoken definitively on multitudes of issues.

No, we're talking about clear wrongdoing denounced by Scripture—from lying and stealing to adultery and murder. If you sense a need to restore someone, remember that! He must clearly be sinning and *continuing* in that sin.

REASONS TO RESTORE

Why is restoration necessary? There are at least three reasons.

First, *to preserve a saint's life*. James wrote, "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (James 5:20). When a brother or sister is committing a sin, he is literally killing himself. He destroys his effectiveness for Christ, his joy, and his fellowship with Him.

In anger, I once said some nasty things to a friend. I went home and sulked, telling myself, *There's no way I'm going to her to apologize!* But the guilt and conflict churned my stomach in hot swirls of emotion. Then my friend graciously came to me and pointed out my sin. I confessed my guilt and reconciliation was effected instantly—between us, and even more importantly, between me and the Lord.

The second reason we must restore sinners is *to preserve the church*. Paul wrote, "Admonish the unruly" (1 Thess. 5:14, *NASB*). Why? Because unruly (sinning) saints can crack a church's foundations. Members become angry and leave because certain behavior is tolerated by the leaders. Others are wounded by the sinner's darts.

In one situation I know of, a teenager's disrespect for a pastor led to all kinds of gossip, anger, backbiting, and confusion in a church. The leaders' unwillingness to confront him and his parents about his behavior caused sin to spread like a stench. A church's external reputation and internal climate are wrecked by saints who sin and don't make amends.

Third, and most important, restoration is necessary to protect God's reputation. When Nathan spoke with David about his sin with Bathsheba, he said, "You have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt" (2 Sam. 12:14). When nonChristians observe the repeated sinful behavior of known Christians, they cry, "The church is full of hypocrites." "Christianity is for creeps." "If your Jesus allows this, I don't want your Jesus."

WHAT TO EXPECT

How then do you work to restore someone you believe is continuing in sin? It's not easy. Before you even confront the person, expect several things to happen.

Satan will try to talk you out of it. He'll use every logical reason he can think of: "It won't do any good." "It's really nothing." "Don't make such a big deal of it." "Aren't you being petty?"

You'll be afraid. In every situation in which I've had to confront someone, I was convinced I'd be rejected and make an enemy for life. The fellow might even sock me in the nose! But again, these are just the ploys of the Devil.

The reaction you get from the one you confront won't be what you expect. The shy person you're afraid will go to pieces will gore you. And the loud and feisty six-foot-four tight end will crumple up and submit to God in tears. Don't try to anticipate all the possibilities. The one you don't think of will be the one that will happen.

STEPS TO RESTORATION

Scripture contains two important passages that show us how to effect restoration. Let's consider them.

In Mt. 18:15–17, Jesus instructed His disciples, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." A whole process is spelled out. But note several points.

One, it's to be done *in private*. That's critical. Don't air your feelings in the foyer after the morning worship service. Speak with the sinner on his turf in an utterly private place. There's no need to complicate the situation by embarrassing him before his peers.

Next, *try to win him*. That calls for persuasion, compassion, a pledge of love, and understanding. You're pleading for his soul.

One couple I knew was continually on the brink of divorce. I began meeting with them each morning for Bible study and prayer. Slowly we began to see daylight in their journey through the darkness. Often, as they argued and accused, I would begin pleading with them, even with tears, to work it out, to seek Christ, to look to His Word for insight. On one occasion, the husband was so struck by my fervor that he remarked, "Mark cares more about our marriage than we do!"

That hit me. I realized that often it's our caring, our pleading, our fervency, that finally convinces a Christian there is hope. Don't be afraid to pour out your heart. This is no place for a blase attitude. This is a spiritual battle, and it may take some wrestling to gain a victory.

WHEN THEY WON'T LISTEN

But what if your brother or sister has no desire to repent or apologize? That's why Jesus spelled out a whole process. In that case, we're to find a second impartial observer and take him or her with us as we speak with the person a second time. The observer is not there to agree with us or defend us, but only to hear what's presented and to get all the facts in order.

If the sinning party still won't listen, take it to the church. Can you imagine what happens to a sinning Christian when his whole church is coming to him and saying, "Bill, you can't go on like this. Repent. Jesus loves you. We love you. Don't continue like this and destroy yourself." It has a way of turning people back before it's too late.

Ultimately, though, if a sinning brother or sister refuses to repent, the church is to regard him as a "pagan or a tax collector"; that is, to regard him as an unbeliever. Refuse to accept him as a Christian. This does not mean, however, that we regard him as an enemy, hate him, or try to destroy him. It simply means we cannot recognize him as a Christian or grant to him Christian privileges—such as communion, positions of leadership, or church membership. He may still come to church, though, if he wants to.

GUIDELINES FROM PAUL

Paul gives some further commands in Gal. 6:1: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also maybe tempted." Again, note several ideas.

First, *approach the sinner gently*.

Second, *take a long look at yourself*. "You who are spiritual" are the confronters. Don't go to confront someone about sin when you have the same problem yourself.

Third, *go with the purpose and expectation of restoring*. Be clear about that. This isn't a witch hunt. It's a lamb search. You want to bring the sinner back into fellowship.

Fourth, *recognize that you're just as susceptible to the sin as he or she is*. That is, get rid of the "holier than thou" attitude. You know it's only by the grace of God that you're not caught in the same trespass. Tell the one you're confronting that you recognize this.

Fifth, *offer assurance* that whatever the sin, it's not unforgivable. There's a way back.

One thing I've discovered with the restoration process is that most Christians who sin are acutely aware they've done wrong. They don't need to be clubbed. They need to be sought with compassion.

BECOMING A LIFESAVER

My friend with the drinking problem resisted me at first. But that evening, as I presented the truths of Scripture and tried to show him how he could be free, his heart melted. He admitted his sin and said, "Help me. I can't beat this thing." A short time later he went to his employer and was enrolled in a hospital program for alcoholics. In a few weeks he was dried out, and he has continued in the faith. Even now I weep as I recall him earnestly telling me that his family's support and my concern restored him to faith and hope.

I always remember him now as I try to continue to apply the truths of Scripture in these matters. You never know what will happen. You could be the one who saves a man's reputation and life. Today.

On Your Own: Restoration: The Language Of Love

1. The book of Galatians is Paul's response to the church upon learning that they have adopted a distorted version of the gospel. He displays many forms of persuasive speech as he attempts to restore the Galatians to faith in the true gospel. What means of communication does he use in the passages below? (See 2 Tim. 4:2 for a partial list.)

Gal. 1:6

Gal. 3:1

Gal. 3:2–5

Gal. 3:6–4:7

Gal. 4:8–11

Gal. 4:12

Gal. 4:13–15

Gal. 4:17

Gal. 4:18

Gal. 4:19–20

For Further Study:

In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul responds to the news that the church at Corinth has repented of allowing immorality, for which he rebuked them in an earlier letter. What effects did his letter have on the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:8)? What was the tone of Paul's response to their repentance? Although the Corinthians were initially hurt by Paul's letter (2 Cor. 7:8–11), how did the interaction eventually affect their relationship (2 Cor. 7:7)?