Saying What Needs to Be Said

By John R. Gibson

"Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him." Luke 17:3, 4

"And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" Luke 15:21

These passages, along with many others, show that we must be willing to admit it when we have wronged someone and then humbly ask their forgiveness. The late John Clark often said that ten of the most important words in a marriage were, "I have sinned. I am sorry. Will you forgive me?" And while these can be critical to the happiness of a marriage, we must be willing to use these same words (or similar ones) in all our relationships.

However, doesn't our stubborn pride sometimes prevent us from doing this? While we may occasionally dig our heels in and refuse to admit to any wrong, there are other times when we can't completely avoid an acknowledgement of wrong, yet still manage to avoid an honest confession. Consider what we may be saying when we utter the following words.

"If I have offended or hurt anyone, I'm sorry." When we say this, are we admitting we have done something wrong though we may not know what specific individuals were hurt by our actions, or could we be failing to accept responsibility with the word if? Could we, in fact, not be subtly suggesting that if others had the kind of love described in 1 Cor. 13:4-7 as suffering long, not being provoked, believing the best of others, etc., then they would not have been offended? Have we shifted the responsibility from ourselves to others?

Similarly, if I say, "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings," am I sorry for my actions or implying that you are too sensitive? In reality, do the recipients of such words not often find themselves on the defensive and reacting as though they must apologize and dismiss our hurtful actions with words like, "That's okay; it was really nothing," when it really was something?

Then there are those times when we admit that we said or did something we shouldn't have, but then seek to mitigate it by our circumstances of life. "I've been under so much pressure at work…things have been rough at home…I've been in a lot of pain lately because of my back, etc." Life can certainly be tough, but the difficulties of life can never justify or lessen the magnitude of our wrongdoing. Joseph was sold as a slave, falsely accused of wrongdoing, and forgotten by the cupbearer, but we never see him giving in to sin. The devil sought to tempt Jesus after forty days of fasting, but He didn't allow hunger or exhaustion to cause him to sin. When we have done wrong, let's not blame those things we cannot control, but accept responsibility for the one person whose actions we can control.

Finally, we may make a direct attack on the person we have wronged with words such as, "I'm sorry I lost my temper with you, but I get so upset when people question my motives, ask too many questions, etc." While there will be times when people do things that upset us, tempt us, provoke us, etc., and the Bible teaches that they will be held accountable for the stumbling block they cast before us (Matt. 18:6, 7), does anyone actually have the ability to make me sin? Instead of sinning in response to some-one's wrong, can I not heed such admonitions as those of Matt. 5:44 to "love [my] enemies, bless those who curse [me], do good

to those who hate [me], and pray for those who spitefully use [me] and persecute [me]?" The confessions of David recorded in 2 Sam. 12:13 and Psa. 51 are noteworthy for what they do not contain; viz. any attempts to blame Bathsheba, the servants who brought her to him, or Joab and his cold-blooded killing of Uriah. David did not try to suggest that if Uriah had been a better husband, then perhaps this affair would have never taken place. No, instead of blaming others, David, with a broken and contrite heart (Psa. 51:17) acknowledged his guilt and took responsibility for his actions.

It may well be that I will need to go to my brother and talk to him about his sinful, provocative actions (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1, 2), but not until I have acknowledged my own sin and have done so without attempting in any way to shift the responsibility for my actions to someone else.

May God help us all learn to say with the younger son, "I have sinned against heaven and in your sight." Then we can rejoice in promises such as those of 1 John 1:8, 9. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

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