

I've Finally Got It Together . . . Why Don't You?

After conquering a sin, be careful not to condemn it in others.

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For reasons I've forgotten, I stayed away from the office that morning. And after a late breakfast, I switched on the television for background noise while tackling housework. A familiar voice boomed from the tube.

Donahue, I surmised, and entered the bathroom, cleanser and scrub brush in hand. *Wonder what he's got people riled up about now?* I turned a faucet handle, and over my splashing and scouring, the T.V. blurted an answer.

That day's entertainment began with a lineup of guests espousing the joys of weight loss. Then to spice their lean-cuisine stories—and the audience's response—Donahue pitted them against a double-chinned lady who insisted that fat is beautiful.

I rejected a half-clean sink to view the woman. With four ex-fatties against her, I knew she'd wind up emotionally carved to the bone. And for the next half hour, I dipped in and out of the bathroom, watching the screen more than the porcelain.

My sympathies sided with the fat lady. At one point, her husband, thin as a popsicle stick, emerged from the audience to deliver his homily, "Why I Love Her Just the Way She Is." I admired his devotion.

But the overweight wife couldn't bask in his love for long. Immediately another female guest countered with a hard-edged sermon about "What's Terribly Wrong with These People." I resented her arrogance.

Just when I'd nominated the slimmed down lady as Most Opinionated Person of the Year, she concluded: "I was right to lose the weight, and I give all of the credit to the Lord."

With scattered whoops from the audience, the obese lady's reputation dwindled to nothing.

And in my opinion, so did the Lord's.

MORE THAN CONQUERORS

Actually, there's no *faux pas* great enough to damage the Lord's reputation or stifle His plans. Yet because of our opinions, we can hurtle potshots that damage people's attitudes toward God—and us. Often it's when we've finally "got the victory" and want strugglers around us to get it too. But for various upside-down reasons, we accomplish the opposite of our intentions, and after we've conquered our sin, we condemn it in others.

So the ex-smoker criticizes the puffing colleague, the reformed gossip lectures her storytelling neighbor; the ex-sedentary can't stomach an out-of-shape friend. And the Christian who's finally mastered a devotional life looks down on his undisciplined spiritual brother.

The basic scenario isn't new. Twenty-five centuries ago, Aesop told a brief fable about a wolf and some shepherds. The animal peered into a hut to watch the shepherds chomp on a mutton joint.

As he observed them carving the roasted carcass, his lips curled.

"The shepherds seem pleased with themselves today. But later when they are full and no longer need the mutton, they will condemn me for doing the same thing," sneered the wolf.

While the fable's plot misses compelling action, the author's moral hits our hearts: People are too apt to condemn in others what they have done themselves.

Why? An even wiser Man explained: "For out of the fullness of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Mt. 12:34, *Amplified*). So when we sputter, "I've finally got it together . . . why don't you?" our tongues are really wagging about what's still wrong inside us:

Sin nature. The prophet Jeremiah once observed, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (**Jer. 17:9, NASB**). We are, at best, a fallen people. If there's a wrong attitude, we'll migrate toward it; if there's a self-promoting action, we'll at least-consider it. And if we gain a victory, we'll find another way to drown in defeat.

"I can't believe it," Mark confided. "I've finally got a handle on self-pity, and now I've replaced it with a critical attitude. I mentally criticize my friends who feel sorry for themselves. Will it ever end?"

Pride. Much of our endless wrestling centers on whether we depend on ourselves or God. When we recognize that our victory comes from God, we'll approach others with humility. When we secretly give ourselves the credit, we'll approach others with pride.

Self-reliance, then, is another reason we cast wolf-like glances at those fighting a sin we've already defeated. But such confidence in self is false. Whatever our method of battle, whatever our path to victory, it's the Lord who supplies the weapons and power to fight.

When we're self-reliant, we might say, "I give the Lord all of the credit," but our spiritual pride causes people to hear, "I did it my way."

Insecurity. While self-reliance springs from pride, the need to say "I was right" stems from insecurity. The person who's "always right" is a controller, dependent upon everyone else's conformity to bolster a sagging self-image.

My friend Elspeth once worked with a woman who had to be right about everything. Elspeth dubs the following conversation as the woman's masterpiece:

"I understand you're taking some more courses," she remarked to another employee.

"No, I'm not," the girl replied in surprise.

"Oh, I'm sure I heard that you are."

"I don't know what you heard," said the girl, "but I ought to know if I'm going to school and I'm not."

"But you're planning to."

"No."

"Then you must have finished a course."

"No! I haven't taken a course since I was enrolled in business school several years ago."

"Business school! There—you see? I was right!"

We can sound just as ridiculous, be just as exasperating, when we insist that others reform themselves exactly the way we did. We also mock God's creativity and sovereignty. He uniquely guides—and delivers—each of us.

"I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope'" (Jer. 29:11, *NASB*). Because we're so anxious for the welfare and hope, we forget that they are results of *God's* plans—not ours or anyone else's. And we create our own calamities.

Ignorance. A friend of mine often made negative comments about men. Although I never voiced my opinion, I grew frustrated with her critical attitude. Like her, I'd had some disappointing romances, but I'd healed after them. Why couldn't she?

Then one morning over coffee, our conversation floated to childhood memories. Somewhat off-handedly, she divulged that when she was eight, her uncle had tried to rape her. For years afterward, she trembled with terror when he visited her family.

Suddenly the pieces fell together. Given this information, my friend's attitude made sense. Even though her uncle was now dead, she was still afraid.

Now that she'd confided, she could start the path to healing. But to take the first steps, my friend needed love, acceptance, and understanding. I recognized how perilously close I'd come to blocking her path with my unenlightened criticism. I saw how easily I judge others when I don't have all the facts or haven't felt the pain myself.

Fear. There are times, however, when we condemn others because we *have* felt the pain. Like a dog barking at his reflection in a mirror, we think we're confronting an intruder when we're really attacking ourselves.

For example, a reformed alcoholic can resent an alcoholic: the drinker intrudes on his sobriety, unearthing a fear that his addiction will return. So the reformed becomes a reformer, harping the alcoholic—and his fear—away.

It's appropriate to avoid intimacy with those who lure us back into sin. Just as Joseph fled Potiphar's wife, we must flee temptation. But when we pounce on people who *aren't* tempters, we demonstrate that we don't understand the love and protection of our heavenly Father.

"Perfect love drives out fear," says the Apostle John, "because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love" (1 Jn. 4:18). Since God's love for us is perfect, we need not condemn others because we fear ourselves.

AFTER THE FALL

Because actions reap consequences, we'll eventually harvest the results of criticizing others who don't have it together. Not only will we inflict damage on others, Scripture says we could eventually sabotage ourselves.

We risk judgment from others. Samuel became a Christian after he separated from his unsaved wife, Dora. He believed God wanted to heal his marriage, and prayed fervently toward that end. However, the more faith Sam had for his marriage, the more he openly criticized friends and church members whose marriages ended in divorce.

After several years of waiting for Dora, Sam met Freida, a lovely Christian woman. Within the year, he filed for divorce and planned a wedding, convinced God wanted Freida to be his new wife. Since Dora had repeatedly been unfaithful to Sam, he felt he had grounds for divorce and remarriage.

As the wedding approached, Sam felt increasingly happy. Some of his friends, however, grew judgmental and bitter, remembering his harsh words for those in similar situations.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Mt. 7:1–2).

We could stumble backward. In the early days of my career, I attended a weeknight Bible study with other professionals. One night I sat through the study like a predator poised to pounce on its prey. When we reached the "share and prayer" time, I burst with the news: "Praise God! For a whole month now, I've had a quiet time *every single day*. That's a real victory for me!" I babbled for a while, but all I remember is how some faces dropped lower and lower as I talked.

They must feel guilty because they're not seeking the Lord like I am, I thought. I'm determined to never repeat my sporadic devotions of the past.

I kept my resolve. In a few months, I wasn't having devotions at all.

"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

We might repel needy people. Mark and Bill, both Christians, cherished a budding friendship. One Saturday while riding to a baseball game, Bill remarked that Larry and Sarah, members of their church, needed prayer.

"They sure do, but the financial trouble they're in is their fault," said Mark. "They just spend, spend, spend. My wife and I got ourselves in trouble a few years back with too many credit cards. We'll never do that again. Larry has dug his own hole."

Bill changed the subject.

Months later, Mark discovered Bill had fallen into a financial hole of his own.

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" asked Mark.

"I wanted to confide in you, but when you criticized Larry, I was afraid you wouldn't understand."

"He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends" (Prov. 17:9).

THE GOOD NEWS

But "getting the victory" doesn't have to mean losing our friends. To keep our hearts open and our mouths shut, we can ask the Holy Spirit to work these qualities into our character:

Compassion. Past bedtime one night, a friend called me and delivered the greatest compliment ever. After unloading her problems, she said, "I'm going through some tough times, and I know your life is pretty smooth now. But I've seen you struggle and overcome, and you've earned the right to give me advice. I know you understand, and you never condemn me."

It was a sacred moment, filled with relief that I'd improved since that arrogant speech to my Bible study group. But it had taken ten years and plenty of failure to quiet me.

Paul told the Ephesians, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). True kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness spring from compassion, an act of the will that says, "I may be victorious, but I will not condemn you; I remember what it's like to struggle."

Humility. While we close our mouths to stifle criticism, we must, at times, open them to rescue sinners from their own condemnation. Galatians 6:1 explains, "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."

The key to this restorative process is a true spirit of humility, usually produced from suffering. Missionary Amy Carmichael advised,

What can we do to help [people faced with temptations]? If only Calvary be the background of our living, if only we continue with our Lord in Gethsemane, if only every common word and deed, our whole bearing, our whole being is steeped in the spirit that was His when He set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem, then those who look to us will see that Cross and be drawn into that fellowship. There is no other way to help them. There is no other way to be helped ourselves.¹

And there is no other way to humility.

Watchfulness. Humility then produces watchfulness, an attitude that states, "But for the grace of God, there go I. And if I don't spiritually guard myself, it will be me."

Paul told the Corinthians, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor. 10:12). Often when we feel the strongest, we're the most vulnerable to Satan's attacks. And if we concede to a former sin, it usually binds us tighter than before.

In Lk. 11:24–26, Jesus gave a chilling account of how this occurs:

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, "I will return to the house I left." When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.

Joy. Michael was a friend whose spiritual life kept escalating while mine stood stagnant. He'd overcome some weaknesses; I, who suffered with similar sins, had not.

So I wouldn't be reminded of my failures, I wanted to shove Michael out of my life. I searched for ways to criticize him as a fake, but didn't get far. I was stopped by his undeniable joy. And I wanted to be like him.

Francois Fenelon, a seventeenth-century mystic, wrote to a friend about unmistakable joy: "Those who are God's are always glad, when they are not divided, because they only want what God wants, and want to do for him all that he wishes. Peace of conscience, liberty of heart . . . freedom from the fears and insatiable desire of the times, multiply a hundredfold the happiness which the true children of God possess they are faithful."²

A quiet, unexplainable joy can speak louder than our most reasonable criticisms.

Ministry. In her mid-thirties and single, Anna became pregnant. When she chose not to abort, she lost her boyfriend, her job, her family, her friends. But she found a deeper relationship with God; a bonding centered on His deep forgiveness.

After her son was born, Anna began helping unwed mothers: encouraging them, providing for them, even midwifing for some of them. When a church condemned an unwed mother, Anna often stepped in to nurture her. Anna's reason: "How can I condemn when I've been there myself? God forgave me; I forgive them."

In his book *Loving God*, Chuck Colson described how God uses former sins for ministry:

The real legacy of my life was my biggest failure—that I was an ex-convict. My greatest humiliation—being sent to prison—was the beginning of God's greatest use of my life; He chose the one experience in which I could not glory for His glory. . . .

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of paradox, where through the ugly defeat of the cross, a holy God is utterly glorified. Victory comes through defeat; healing through brokenness; finding self through losing self.³

And helping others to victory depends on becoming quiet before God instead of hitting the talk shows.

Notes

1. Amy Carmichael, *Whispers of Power* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1982), p. 57.
2. Sherwood Wirt, ed., *Spiritual Disciplines* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983), p. 77.
3. Charles Colson, *Loving God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), p. 24-25.

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