

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO A FRIEND WHO'S BEEN PUT OFF BY CHRISTIANS?

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, June 28, 2009

What do you say to a friend who has been put off by Christians or wounded in the church?

From the time I arrived in Marin County as a pastor, I began to meet people who once had been part of vital churches, but no longer were engaged. Some retained their faith in Jesus, but avoided organized churches. Others, tragically, no longer walked with Christ.

You may know some yourself, who once professed faith in God, but have since retreated. In far too many cases, they blame the treatment they received (or failed to receive) from the church or its members.

We've all heard the deplorable reports of sexual abuse by once trusted church leaders. Of course, such behaviors are not restricted, by any means, to representatives of churches, but they seem so much worse when they are.

Of all the authority figures we have known, those who profess to know and represent Holy God and His Son, Jesus, the Savior who suffered for us, should be most distant from such perversity.

You, of course, are the survivors. But many brothers and sisters no longer walk with us. They have not recanted their faith, but they have buried it in part. Only this self-imposed distance suppresses their bitter grief.

Jesus Himself was not unfamiliar with such treatment. Hailed as their new King upon His return to Jerusalem, in just a few days the same crowds cried, "Crucify Him!" Rejected by those He came to save, denied by His friends in His hour of need, and betrayed by one close enough to offer Him a warm embrace, Jesus knew the sting of disloyalty.

My Own Familiar Friend

Psalm 41:9 *Even my best friend, the one I trusted completely, the one who shared my food, has turned against me.*

At the last supper that He shared with His disciples...

John 13:18 *"I am not saying these things to all of you; I know the ones I have chosen. But this fulfills the Scripture that says, 'The one who eats my food has turned against me.'*

Jesus knew what people can be like.

John 2:23 *Because of the miraculous signs Jesus did in Jerusalem at the Passover celebration, many began to trust in him.²⁴ But Jesus didn't trust them, because he knew human nature.²⁵ No one needed to tell him what mankind is really like.*

Mark 7:21 From within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. 23 All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you."

This is the baseness, the meanness, of which people are capable, regardless of privilege, upbringing, or spiritual experience.

There exists among even Christians a wide range of spiritual maturity, that is not necessarily related to one's title or position in a church!

Therefore, we have been warned in the Bible not to promote recent believers too quickly, lest, for lack of self-control, they become trapped by the devil's snare.

This is a universal danger. Which of us has not been hurt or offended by our own parents or someone else close to us? In the vast majority of cases, the injuries are minor (often involving only our pride) and relationships have been repaired and we have recovered. In fact, there are a great many vital lessons to be learned in just this way — from not telling lies about others to how to make amends for your mistakes.

But sometimes, self-protection eclipses relationship, and we prefer to retreat rather than to reconcile. I will not presume to utter a judgment against that decision. But I do seek the greatest health possible for you and for Christ's Church.

Double Your Losses

The much greater loss that some experience is damage to their growing faith in God.

According to Jesus (Matthew 13), three out of four who begin to trust God with their lives fail to see significant fruit from that relationship due to the condition of their own hearts. It is not what happens to them at the hand of circumstances or relationships; it is how they respond *on the inside* to the circumstances and relationships in their lives.

Because of the pain, or the confusion or fear or anger that the pain generated, faith in God may be stunted, or even destroyed.

Some, who imagine that the all-powerful God should simply prevent every misdeed of people, rather than allowing them freedom to choose their own way, blame God for the calamities and corruptions that befall them.

Have they misjudged God? Is He unable to protect them from abuse? Or, if they trusted Him, would He help them to endure mistreatment and continue to love?

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. 2 We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. 3 Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up. 4 After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin.

I say to you, you cannot have it both ways. You cannot be someone's puppet when you do wrong, but the master of your ship when you do right. That is willful blindness and hypocrisy.

More to the point, you cannot forsake responsibility whenever it suits you. When God declared His judgment against personal sin, He spoke plainly:

Ezekiel 18:20 *The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent's sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child's sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness.*

Dan Kimball, a pastor in Santa Cruz, California, has written an insightful book — the result of many conversations with all sorts of people from his community — which he titled, “They Like Jesus but Not the Church.”

At least such people have properly identified the party to blame, although they have not yet overcome their own personal challenge.

To abandon the church that is the apple of God’s eye and the agent of His activities on the earth is bad enough. A “Lone Ranger Christian” is a prime example of an oxymoron.

But to abandon the only One who loved us and bought us with His own precious blood is lunacy. One cannot remain a Christian (except in name only) if he does not continue to live for the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Imitate Christ

1 Corinthians 10:31 *So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.* ³² *Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God.* ³³ *I, too, try to please everyone in everything I do. I don't just do what is best for me; I do what is best for others so that many may be saved.*
^{11:1} *And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.*

We have been called to imitate Christ, not men. Paul did not say only “Imitate me,” but “Imitate me as I imitate Christ.” In other words, “When I do what Christ did, you do that, too.”

Ephesians 5:1 *Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children.* ² *Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.*

The example Christ set for us was one of self-sacrifice — a theme many would prefer to ignore unless it brings some limelight their way. And what sort of sacrifice did Jesus make? He sacrificed Himself to the hands of ungodly religious people, who used God’s words to support their evil habit of self-propagation, but failed to comprehend or practice God’s ways of loving. God’s love is durable and persistent.

Romans 8:31 *What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?*

Romans 8:35 *Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?* ³⁷ *No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.*

Romans 8:38 *And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even*

the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ *No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Paul links this powerful revelation to our responsive behaviors. The way God loves us should profoundly influence the ways we treat each other.

Romans 14:13 *So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.*

As John also said, *"We love each other because he loved us first"* (1 John 4:19).

A Bitter Pill

For you, it might have been a priest or a pastor, it might have been a church member or a family member, it might have been someone you respected or looked up to, it might have been a personal friend. Nevertheless, we have a relational responsibility to each other, even if we've been offended.

Hebrews 12:15 *Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.*

Grace means two things: (1) the mercy of God that accepts us as we are in order to make us what He wants us to be, and (2) the strength of God to live our lives in ways that please Him.

Are you receiving God's grace? Are you sharing His grace with others? And, are you encouraging others to receive His grace as well?

What is your BQ (Bitterness Quotient)? Of course you may feel uncomfortable to be near those who have hurt you — that is normal, if not appropriate — but do you secretly (or not so secretly) wish them pain in return?

Then your enemies have become your masters, instead of Jesus Christ. And you are confined to living according to your past, instead of pursuing your destiny. Then, what good does the new birth do for you?

Release Your Grip

It's time to release your spiritual and emotional grip on those who have hurt you! If you don't, the memory of them will hurt you over and over again. While there may be some morbid pleasure in such self-affliction, or some imaginary cleansing, the mercies of God really get whites whiter! No one does a better job of cleansing the soul and freeing the mind than Jesus.

Confess your bitterness and receive God's grace. Then forgive those who have wounded you. Forgive them.

Forgiveness is not a "free pass." It is a release from the grip of your own feeble judgment, so the Judge of all the earth may do His job. It is freedom for you from self-inflicted resentment.

Mark 11:25 *When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.*

Jesus repeated this counsel:

Luke 6:37 Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven.

It's hard work to release an imaginary captive, but it's the right thing to do — for God's sake, for your sake, and for their sake.

Grace Sufficient

The past is history. Your past is *your* story. It will never go away completely. But it can cease to infect your present. Jesus came to free you from the bondages of your past — whether they resulted from your sins or those of others.

When the images and feelings of past hurts arise and threaten to sweep you off balance, remember God's words to Apostle Paul:

2 Corinthians 12:9 "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."

Receive God's grace again.

What do you say to a friend who has been put off by Christians or wounded in the church? Say:

- You're not alone.
- Don't blame God.
- Do what Jesus did.
- Don't let it fester.
- Let them go.
- Receive God's grace.