

A Time to Confront

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If there's anything more intimidating than being told about your faults, it's having to tell other people about theirs. Most of us don't like confronting others. This is especially true in modern society, where the accepted rule is "you mind your business and I'll mind mine."

Although we should willingly overlook minor offenses, there are some problems that will only grow worse if they are not dealt with in a straightforward way. Janet, a friend of mine, learned this lesson when friction between her and a fellow teacher got out of hand.

Larry seemed to irritate almost every person in the school. He continually made fun of other people, often in embarrassing ways. For some reason, he seemed to pick more on Janet than on anyone else. Whenever she walked into the teachers' lounge, Larry would look up and say something sarcastic to or about her. As a result, Janet found herself avoiding the lounge whenever she thought he might be there.

Janet had been a Christian for several years, so she was troubled by the fact that Larry also claimed to be a Christian. She was particularly distressed by the effect Larry's behavior was having on Carol, a teacher to whom Janet had been witnessing for over a year. The more Carol was repelled by Larry's behavior, the less open she was to Christianity.

"If that's what it means to be a Christian, no thanks," she said to another teacher one day. "The people I meet at the bar are more decent than he is!"

Janet had already confronted Larry several times about his conduct. Unfortunately, since she always did it without thinking, usually after he had just offended her, her words were usually angry and sarcastic. This only made Larry defensive and led to an argument, after which they would both walk away fuming.

Finally seeing the damage that was being done by their open conflict, Janet realized that it was time to get help. One evening she called to ask me for advice.

The Slippery Slope

As Janet unfolded her story, it became apparent that she was reacting to Larry in a way that is typical of many people. Rather than talking to him in a thoughtful and constructive manner, she was alternating between various escape and attack responses (see the slippery slope diagram).

Most of the time Janet practiced denial, hoping that the conflict had gone away. When Larry embarrassed her again, she counter-attacked with sarcastic words. Then she quickly retreated and tried to avoid another encounter as long as possible. Just when she thought the problem had gone away, he would provoke her again, and the pattern would repeat itself. With each new cycle, Janet's anger toward Larry increased, leading to a condemning attitude that Jesus equates with murder (see Matt. 5:21-22).

Once she saw how destructive her behavior had been, Janet was eager to pursue a more biblical response. So we met a few days later and I walked her through the "Four G's" of peacemaking.

Glorify God

As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:31, conflict provides an opportunity to glorify God. At first Janet thought this was merely an abstract concept. But after we looked at how heroes of the Bible (Joseph, David, Abigail, Daniel, and Paul) honored God and advanced his Kingdom in the way they handled conflict, she realized how relevant this concept was to resolving her dispute with Larry. Therefore, as she planned her next steps, she made a conscious commitment to please and honor God by depending on his wisdom, power, and love,

by faithfully obeying his commands, and by seeking to maintain a loving, merciful, and forgiving attitude.

Get the Log out of Your Eye

Throughout the previous months, Janet had been focusing intensely on Larry's sinful behavior. Drawing her attention to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:3-5, I helped her to see that she had things backward. Before she could properly confront Larry with his wrongs, she needed to take responsibility for her contribution to their conflict.

Since most of us are prone to superficial confessions, I urged her to use the "Seven A's of Confession."

- **A**ddress everyone involved
- **A**void if, but, and maybe (don't make excuses)
- **A**dmit specifically (both attitudes and actions)
- **A**pologize (express godly sorrow for the way she affected Larry)
- **A**ccept the consequences
- **A**lter your behavior (commit to changing harmful habits)
- **A**sk for forgiveness

Gently Restore

Perhaps the hardest thing for Janet was thinking about confronting Larry. She was not bold by nature, and her previous encounters with him made her feel that further conversations were pointless. But once again, she decided to follow the teaching of Scripture rather than her own feelings.

After we considered Matthew 18:15 and Galatians 6:1-2, she realized that Larry's sins were too serious to overlook. As a matter of obedience and Christian love, she needed to go to Larry and try to help him see the truth about his behavior.

As Janet prepared to confront Larry, I suggested that she take the following steps:

- Pray for humility and wisdom
- Plan her words carefully (for instance, think of how she would want to be confronted)
- Anticipate likely reactions and plan appropriate responses
- Choose the right time and place (talk in person whenever possible)
- Assume the best about Larry until facts prove otherwise (Prov. 11:27)
- Listen carefully (Prov. 18:13)
- Speak only to build Larry up (Eph. 4:29)
- Ask for feedback
- Recognize her limits (she could speak the truth in love, but only God could change Larry's heart; see 2 Tim. 2:24-26)

Go and Be Reconciled

Finally, I helped Janet to clarify her understanding of biblical forgiveness. Instead of settling for a superficial truce with Larry, she needed to actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation, forgiving Larry just as God for Christ's sake had forgiven her (Eph. 4:32). The best way I know to communicate such forgiveness is by making four specific promises:

- I will not think about (dwell on or brood over) this incident.
- I will not bring up this incident and use it against you.
- I will not talk to others about this incident.
- I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

As Janet thought about these promises, a light came into her eyes. "That's the gospel, isn't it?" she asked. "That's what God has promised me because of what Jesus did on the cross." This insight moved her more than anything else we had talked about. Peacemaking, she realized, is

nothing more—and nothing less—than living out the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have offended us.

A Biblical View of Success

Finally, I cautioned Janet to maintain a biblical perspective on success. No matter how hard she tried, Larry might not respond favorably. If so, it would not mean that she had failed. God does not measure success by specific results, but by our faithful obedience (see Rom. 12:18). As long as Janet looked to God for strength and did her best to obey what the Bible teaches, she could walk away with peace of mind and a clear conscience before God regardless of what Larry did.

Stepping Out in Faith

After we finishing discussing these principles, we prayed that the Lord would give both Janet and Larry grace to resolve their differences in a way that would please and honor him. Janet then went home and spent the evening planning what she would do and say the next day.

The next morning, she arrived at school early enough to talk with Larry before any of his students arrived. After telling him that she was concerned about the argument they had had earlier that week, she asked if he would have some time later that day to talk. With some hesitancy, he agreed to meet her in a spare office at 3:30.

When they met later, Larry was obviously nervous and defensive. Janet put him at ease by explaining what she hoped to accomplish through their meeting. She then offered a sincere and detailed confession on how she had sinned against Larry. She also said that she planned to go to the other teachers who had witnessed her outbursts and admit that her behavior was wrong.

When Janet finally asked for Larry's forgiveness, he was so surprised that all he could say was, "That's okay. I know I can be sort of abrasive at times."

Instead of settling for this superficial repentance, Janet went on to tell Larry graciously how his conduct was affecting her, other people, and their Christian witness. Larry became defensive again and tried to excuse his behavior. Having planned how to respond to that tactic, Janet was prepared to give him specific examples of hurtful statements he had made. She also appealed to him with regard to his Christian witness. Instead of getting angry or harsh, she kept her voice under control and continued to express her concern for Larry and her desire to do what would please and honor the Lord. While they talked, Janet prayed silently that God would help Larry to see the truth about himself.

After forty-five minutes of tense conversation, Larry began to soften. He admitted that his behavior was sinful and agreed that he needed to change. He went on to tell Janet that he had always had trouble getting along with people and that being sarcastic was his way of getting attention. Janet responded with understanding and shared similar struggles in her own life. They then discussed several ways they could help each other to overcome some of their harmful habit patterns. They also agreed to meet once a week for five minutes of prayer before school and to ask another Christian teacher to join them.

As Larry reflected on Janet's commitment to talk to the teachers who had witnessed her behavior, he realized he needed to do the same. He began by going to Carol and asking for forgiveness for the way had spoken to her. She was so astonished that she didn't know what to say. Her wonder increased over the following weeks when she saw the way Larry and Janet were treating each other. As a result, Janet found Carol to be much more open to talking about Jesus.

By God's grace, Janet's decision to confront her Christian brother in love not only won him over but also cleared the way for others to learn about the peace that comes through Christ.