

LOVE  
KNOW  
▶ SPEAK  
DO

# 11

THE GOALS OF SPEAKING  
THE TRUTH IN LOVE

From the moment she entered my office, it was clear that Sally was ready for a fight. She glared her way into the room and made tense small talk with me until I prayed. I was the principal of the Christian school her daughter attended, and I had asked Sally and her husband to come and talk about the difficulties her daughter was having at school. I was there as a friend and ally. I was actually quite fond of her daughter and I was concerned that somehow we were missing an opportunity to help her.

I made my first statement, trying to be affirming and warm as I described the difficulties we were experiencing. To my surprise, Sally yelled back at me, accusing me of not loving her daughter and wanting only to rid the school of its “problems.” I tried again to quietly share my love and concern, only to have Sally yell at me again, this time sitting forward in her seat and moving closer to my desk. I made one more attempt to help her understand that I was not accusing her daughter (or Sally herself) of anything; my purpose was to share my concerns and look for solutions. As she began to shout a third time, Sally’s husband grabbed her knee and said, “Dear, he is not fighting with you.”

Sally looked at me for a moment as if she were disoriented. She mumbled, “I’m sorry. I just hate these kinds of meetings. I was sure you were going to tell us what bad parents we are.” Perhaps Sally isn’t too unusual. Perhaps many of us approach moments of truth speaking with fear and dread. Perhaps for many of us, words like *confrontation* and *rebuke* conjure up images that look like anything but love. Sally

had obviously been hurt in previous confrontations and this time had been prepared to defend herself.

Rebuke is the word the Bible uses for bringing truth to where change is needed, yet most of us don't react positively when we hear it. For example, if I called you one night and said that I would like to come over the next morning to rebuke you, how would you respond? Would you run to a friend and say, "The most wonderful thing is going to happen to me tomorrow! Paul is coming over to rebuke me. I can't wait! It has been so long since I've been rebuked." That would not likely be your reaction. Many of us would rather go to the dentist and be drilled without Novocain. When we think of rebuke, we think of harsh words, red faces, ultimatums, and threats. We don't think of an act of patient and committed love. So it is important to consider what a biblical model of rebuke looks like. It is part of the **Speak** component of personal ministry, and we need to know what "speaking the truth in love" is all about.

Leviticus 19:15-18 discusses God's intentions for this aspect of relationships and personal ministry.

- Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.
- Do not go about spreading slander among your people.
- Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD.
- Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.
- Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

The principles of this passage provide a starting point for a biblical understanding of confrontation.

**Confrontation is rooted in a submission to the First Great Command.** This command calls us to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Twice the Leviticus passage says, "I am the LORD." God in-

WHY WE DON'T RESPOND?  
Don't respond?

tends confrontation to be an expression of our submission to him in our relationships with others. From God's perspective, the only reason we confront one another is that we love the Lord and want to obey him. Our failure to confront one another biblically must be seen for what it is: something rooted in our tendency to run after god-replacements. We confront unbiblically (or not at all) because we love something else more than God. Perhaps we love our relationship with this person so much that we don't want to risk it. Perhaps we prefer to avoid the personal sacrifice and complications that confrontation may involve. Perhaps we love peace, respect, and appreciation more than we should. Here is the principle: To the degree that we give the love of our hearts to someone or something else, to that degree we lose our primary motive to confront. But if we love God above all else, confrontation is an extension and expression of that love.

First John teaches us (3:11-20; 4:7-21) that one of the most reliable indicators of our love for God is the quality of our love for our neighbor. The foundation of the Second Great Command is the First Great Command—you cannot love your neighbor as yourself if you do not first love God above all else. Our willingness to gossip, to live in anger, and trim the truth reveals something deeper than a lack of love for people. It exposes a lack of love for God. We no longer serve as his ambassadors in relationships but use them for our own purposes. They become places where our needs can be met. Then, because we are afraid to lose what we crave, we live in silence as our neighbor steps outside God's boundaries.

Love for God is the only reliable foundation for a ministry of truth speaking. Any other motivation distorts the process. We cannot come in anger, frustration, or a spirit of vengeance. We come because we love God and speak on his behalf to someone who may be wandering away. Confrontation has little to do with us. It is all about the Lord, motivated by a desire to draw people back into close, obedient, and loving communion with him.

**Confrontation is rooted in the Second Great Command,** which calls us to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Isn't it inter-

esting that the Old Testament call to love your neighbor as yourself is tied to this call to frank rebuke? A rebuke free of unrighteous anger is a clear sign of biblical love, but I am afraid we have replaced love in our relationships with being "nice." Being nice and acting out of love are not the same thing. Our culture puts a high premium on being tolerant and polite. We seek to avoid uncomfortable moments, so we see, but do not speak. We go so far as to convince ourselves that we are not speaking *because* we love the other person, when in reality we fail to speak because we lack love.

Please don't misunderstand. True love is not offensively intrusive or rude. But the Bible repudiates covering sin with a facade of silence. It teaches that those who love will speak, even if it creates tense, upsetting moments. If we love people and want God's best for them, how can we stand by as they wander away? How can we let them deceive themselves with excuses, blame, and rationalizations? How can we watch them get more and more enslaved by the fleeting pleasures of sin? How can we let a sufferer add to his suffering by the way he responds to his own experience? True love is neither idle nor timid. It is other-centered and active.

The truth is that we fail to confront, not because we love others too much, but because we love *ourselves* too much. We fear others misunderstanding us or being angry with us. We are afraid of what others will think. We don't want to endure the hardships of honesty because we love ourselves more than we love our neighbors. Yet we know that the depth of love in a relationship can be judged by the degree of honesty that exists. Biblical rebuke is motivated by the Second Great Command.

### *Confrontation is our moral responsibility in every relationship.*

The passage says, "Rebuke your neighbor frankly." This call extends beyond the borders of formal counseling, discipleship, and ministry relationships. It is a call to respond to all who live near us. Rebuke is not something that exists outside a good relationship, brought in only at crisis moments. The Bible presents confrontation as one of the cords of a strong relationship, a normal part of the interaction that makes the relationship what it is.

Often when people hear the words *rebuke* and *confrontation*, they think of a radical moment of truth telling, a long list of stern indictments against a person who is significantly rebellious or who has tragically wandered away. Yet the model here is ongoing honesty in an ongoing relationship. Rather than one big moment of confrontation, the model here is many mini-moments of confrontation. The biblical model recognizes that as we live and work with others, our hearts will be progressively exposed. It calls us to deal with whatever God reveals as he reveals it. In each small moment of truth speaking, the progress of sin is retarded and spiritual growth is encouraged. The model in Leviticus fits perfectly with the progressive sanctification model of growth and ministry that the New Testament presents. Here, too, problems are addressed while still in their infancy, before they mature into tragic consequences.

Notice also that the passage says, "... so that you will not share in his guilt." There could be no clearer statement of our moral responsibility. Each of our relationships must be pursued in absolute submission to the will and way of the Lord. We have been called to serve as ambassadors of the One who is Lord of every relationship. We must never function as mini-kings, setting our own rules and pursuing our own way.

Rebuke does not mean that our love is conditional. However, the self-sacrificing love of this passage exists at the intersection of patient grace and intolerance for sin. This means that I love you and I will not walk away from you at the first sign of weakness or sin. I will extend to you the same grace I have received. At the same time, however, my love for you does not close its eyes to wrongdoing. It does not stay silent while sin is allowed to grow. The love I am called to extend is the love of the cross of Christ, which stands at the intersection of God's grace and his complete intolerance with sin. His intolerance does not cause God to move away. He moves *toward* me in redemptive love, so that someday I will stand before him without sin. This is what we are called to embody in our relationships. Anything less is to be a moral accomplice in the sin.

How many sermons have you heard on the immorality of self-

absorbed silence? How often have you viewed your unwillingness to confront as an act of rebellion in itself? Have you ever considered how often you have chosen to be silent, when God was calling you to be part of his rescue effort? We are called to accept moral responsibility for the things God reveals to us about others. To refuse to speak is to rebel against the Lord we say we love and serve.

Having said this, I should note that this passage does not give you permission to live as if you were someone else's conscience. It does not call you to a self-righteousness that displays a rude and judgmental spirit. This passage repudiates all those things. It is a neighbor-to-neighbor passage. It does not assume two classes of people, the "rebukers" and the "neighbors." The rebukers *are* the neighbors and the neighbors *are* the rebukers. As a neighbor I live in desperate need of the loving restraint God gives me through my neighbors. And as a neighbor I am called to serve others the same way. As long as indwelling sin remains, we all need help and we all need to help others. Sinners minister to sinners with the help of God.

***Confrontation is meant to be more of a lifestyle than an unusual event.*** Confrontation is difficult when it is not a normal part of our experience. Sometimes it is so rare that we lack the necessary understanding, expectations, and skills. Instead, we fumble and fail, only making people dread the next time, like Sally. But from the Bible's perspective, a good relationship always grows in its ability to recognize, confront, and deal with the truth. Each time we speak the truth, we grow in our understanding of our calling and our skill in carrying it out.

Often there is so little honest conversation between parents and teenagers that moments of rebuke are extremely uncomfortable. At one point in our family, there were important things we needed to discuss with our daughter. We decided to make weekly appointments to talk with her about them. The first time was very difficult, but each time got easier. Soon the ground we gained spilled over into our informal conversations. All our interactions began to be more comfort-

able and honest. This passage envisions a "constant conversation" model where the daily intervention of honest rebuke is a regular part of all relationships.

There is also a payoff for more formal discipleship and counseling situations. The person who has made honest, humble, loving rebuke a part of his daily relationships (as a giver and a receiver) will be clear and comfortable when he confronts a person in a more structured setting. The skills of family leadership and ministry also make us effective in the church of Christ. Perhaps we confront poorly or not at all because we do not have a ministry mentality or communication maturity at home. If we have avoided confrontation or been more angry than constructive in our rebukes, how can we expect to be ready when God gives us opportunities in the church?

***We fail to confront in love because we have yielded to subtle and passive forms of hatred.*** Embedded in the passage is a contrast between love and hatred. If you tried to illustrate this passage, it would look like this: At the center is a high plateau of love, based on a commitment to honest rebuke. On either side is a dark valley of hatred. One is the valley of passive hatred and the other is the valley of active hatred. Both are temptations and both are wrong! Leviticus 19 is clear that we must find a way to lovingly confront sin when we see it in others. If we fail to do so, we cannot console ourselves by saying, "Perhaps I am not loving this person as God wants me to, but at least I do not hate him!" There is no neutral ground between love and hatred. Our response to the sins of others is either motivated by Second Great Command love or by some form of hatred.

One subtle form of hatred is favoritism, granting favor to some but refusing it to others because of a standard we have set up in our own minds. It may be based on economic status, physical appearance, race or ethnicity, doctrinal differences, self-righteousness, revulsion over particular sins, or something else. Some people live outside the circle of our favor (and therefore our ministry) simply because of who they are. This can even happen in families. I fear that there is much more hatred in our families and churches than we think.

A second form of passive hatred is bearing a grudge. We keep a record of what someone has done against us. We go over it again and again, each time growing more angry and giving ourselves more reason to despise the offender. Our anger grows even when no further sin has been committed; it becomes the interpretive grid through which we assess everything the person does. No matter what he does, he cannot do anything right in our eyes. Everything is distorted by the anger and bitterness through which we view it, destroying any possibility of dealing with sin in godly way.

This passage does not offer an exhaustive discussion of passive hatred, but it does warn us of the myth of “neutral ground” and indicate what passive hatred looks like. We are constantly dealing with the sins of others, as they are with us. The issue is whether our responses are motivated by biblical love or by self-righteous, prejudiced, and grudge-bearing hatred.

*We fail to confront because we have yielded to more active forms of hatred.* Here we not only act as the judge, but as the jailer and executioner as well. This passage says that there are three ways our hatred actively reveals itself: injustice, gossip, and revenge. All three have been present in all of our lives at some point, and all three respond destroy, or at least distort, the biblical ministry of rebuke. God ordained rebuke to restrain sin until our redemption is complete. We either position ourselves to be part of that work or we stand in the way. Injustice perverts God’s system of restraint. It doesn’t protect, correct, or restrain the sinner. It hurts and mistreats him.

Gossip doesn’t lead a person to make humble confession before God or others. When I gossip, I confess the sin of another person to someone who is not involved. Gossip doesn’t restrain sin; it encourages it. It doesn’t build someone’s character; it destroys his reputation. Gossip doesn’t lead a person to humble insight; it produces anger and defensiveness.

Revenge is the opposite of ministry. Ministry is motivated by a desire for someone’s good; revenge is motivated by a desire to harm him. We have forsaken our call to bring the person to the Lord so that he

can see himself as he really is, and given ourselves instead to a quest to settle the score.

What is so terribly serious about all this is that we have been called to incarnate the glory of Christ’s love on earth—to love as he has loved us so that people would know we are his disciples. The ultimate apologetic for the reality of the gospel is the loving unity of the body of Christ, a unity so deep, resilient, and pervasive that it can only be compared to the unity of the Trinity. (See John 13–17.) Our call is to find satisfaction in our relationships, not because people please us, but because we delight in displaying God’s love to a hopeless world.

What a difference it makes to see that being sinned against is not an occasion for vengeance but for God to be revealed! Instead of assuming God’s position as judge, we ask how we can incarnate his love to the people involved in the hurtful situation. Too often we forget that there is nothing more wonderful than to be Christ’s ambassadors. We participate in the most important work of the universe.

We can do this because sin’s mastery over us has been broken as we have been united with Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (Rom. 6:1–14) and indwelt by a Holy Spirit who battles the flesh on our behalf (Gal. 5:16–26; Rom. 8:1–11). Because of this, we can say “no” to powerful emotions (passions) and compelling desires (Gal. 5:24) and turn in a new direction. We do not have to give the parts of our body to favoritism, grudges, gossip, injustice, and revenge. Rather, we can offer ourselves to the Lord for his use. The cross of Christ not only provides redemption, but the resources we need to be part of his work.

*Confrontation flows out of a recognition of our identity as the children of God.* The passage repeats the phrase, “I am the LORD.” It reminds us that we have been chosen by him, and our lives are no longer our own. Everything we are and have belongs to him, and we will find our greatest joy in relationships when we recognize that they, too, belong to him. We are the Lord’s. They are the Lord’s. The situation is the Lord’s. Loving confrontation is rooted in an awareness that we are God’s children, and our goal is to be active in his purposes for us. To do less is to forget who we are.

*Proper biblical confrontation is never motivated by impatience, frustration, hurt, or anger, but is one way God prevents these things from damaging our relationships. Failure to make loving rebuke part of our relationships gives the Devil a huge opportunity. I have met many couples who have lost all the tenderness, appreciation, patience, respect, sensitivity, and romance in their relationship. These precious commodities had been destroyed by a failure to confront sin biblically. Their marriages had become a cycle of accusation, recrimination, and revenge. Bitterness and anger had sucked the life out of their love until the spouses could barely remember what once attracted them to each other. They never intended it, but their refusal to confront sin in God's way and their daily habit of devouring each other had gutted their relationship. The sweet, hopeful couple of the past had become two isolated, angry, and hopeless people who wanted out of their marriage.*

A humble, honest lifestyle of rebuke protects us from ourselves. As sinners living with sinners, we need something to retard the progress of sin in our relationships. Early in our marriage Lurella and I decided that we would not let the sun go down on our anger (Eph. 4:26). We promised each other that we would not go to bed angry. At first we would lie in bed, propping our eyes open, waiting for the other person to ask for forgiveness so that we wouldn't have to. But as time went on, we saw how this principle restrained our sin, strengthened our relationship, protected our love, and matured us both. We have been married for over thirty years and we are still sinners, yet we love each other more than ever, and we don't carry yesterday's baggage into today's encounters. Each anniversary we thank the Lord for rescuing us from ourselves.

*Confrontation does not force a person to deal with you, but places him before the Lord. The most important encounter in confrontation is not the person's encounter with you, but with Christ. Rebuke does not force a person to face your judgment; it gives him an opportunity to do business with God. It is motivated by a desire for the person to receive the grace of conviction, confession, forgiveness, and*

repentance—to experience the grace we also have received. Confrontation does not enforce legalities; it ministers the restraining, forgiving, restoring grace of Christ to someone who has turned from him. It is not motivated by punishment, but by the hope that the Lord would free this person from the prison of his own sin to know the freedom of walking in fellowship with him.

### BIBLICAL CONFRONTATION MEANS STARTING WITH YOUR OWN HEART

Since personal biblical ministry involves building relationships that encourage and support God's work in hearts, it is impossible to serve without somehow being touched by the sin and struggle of those we serve. The angry person will get angry with you, the distrustful person will question your trustworthiness, and the discouraged person will probably receive your best counsel with cynicism and doubt. Since personal ministry is about incarnating the presence of Christ, we want to respond in the right way to the things we experience in the relationship.

If we are going to be faithful to Christ in such circumstances, we must begin by examining our own hearts. Are there thoughts, motives, or attitudes (self-righteousness, anger, bitterness, spirit of condemnation, vengeance) that would get in the way of what God intends to do? As instruments of Christ's grace, we must confess that we need that grace just as much as the people we are helping. We need God to provide the love, courage, compassion, and wisdom we will need to represent him well.

Sadly, this step of preparation is often neglected. The result is that the rebuke is not effective, not only because the receiver was unteachable but because the ambassador was unprepared. If I do not start with my own heart I will tend to:

*Turn moments of ministry into moments of anger. If I do not face the ways the person has made me angry, my words will be*

shaped more by my anger than by the good God wants to do through me.

*Personalize what is not personal.* If I do not deal with my heart, the horizontal offenses (against me) will seem more significant than the person's vertical life (relationship with God). I will become increasingly sensitive to how the person is treating me. Before long, I will take offense at things that are not personal, but are simply indicators of where basic changes are needed in the person's heart.

*Be adversarial in my approach.* This follows directly from personalizing what is not personal. The more I am hurt and fail to deal with it, the more I assume a "stand against" posture rather than a "stand with" posture when I encounter the one who hurt me. It is tragic but true: we do sometimes become the adversaries of people we are called to help. It happens with friends, spouses, parents and children, and pastors and their flocks. When it does, we get in the way of what the Wonderful Counselor is seeking to do.

*Confuse my opinion with God's will.* The last thing a person needs in confrontation is my opinion. He needs to see himself from a biblical perspective, and he needs a sense of calling. (What is God calling him to do in response to what is happening inside and around him?) My job is to hold the mirror of the Word of God in front of him so that he can see himself accurately. However, when I fail to deal with my own heart, my words will be driven by my feelings, desires, and opinions. If I start by examining my own heart, I help ensure that my agenda is the same as the Lord's.

*Settle for quick solutions that do not address the heart.* When I do not face my own sinful attitudes, my ministry to this person will be shaped less and less by Christ-like love and more and more by other attitudes. I will be less and less excited by what God can do (and by the privilege of being part of it), and more and more eager to get out of the relationship. Rather than being motivated to persevere until God has accomplished all that he intends, I will find the person irritating and the relationship burdensome. I will be attracted to quick, superficial solutions that allow me to move on. My responses are not driven by love for God or for the person, but by a love for self.

Take a careful look at your own heart. These things *do* happen to people in ministry. They impact the fellowship of the body of Christ and subvert the good God is seeking to do in our families. Are there sinful attitudes you have not faced that can hinder the ministry God has planned for you? Parents, are your daily interactions with your children shaped by Christ-like patience? Counselors, are you incarnating the character of the Lord? Pastors, are there people in church that you have given up on? Brother and sisters, do you have friendships that are tense or broken? Husbands and wives, is your marriage reduced to casual conversation and household plans? It is impossible to speak the truth in love when I am not dealing with the thoughts, feelings, desires, and attitudes that stand in the way.

Remember, God has ordained that difficult person to be in your life. It is not a sign of God's inattention but his covenant-keeping care. Humbly embrace the fact that the Wonderful Counselor is working on everybody involved. Humbly acknowledge the ways God is using this person to expose the areas where you need to grow. Embrace the fact that God can transform the heart of that person without neglecting you—and vice versa! Most of all, celebrate! You are experiencing the jealous grace and glory of the Lord. Through you, he is fighting for that person's heart and through him, he is holding tightly onto yours. He will not let either of you go, and he will not forsake the work he is doing in each of you. Remember, it is impossible to celebrate God's work of transformation without confessing your need for more. No one is more ready to communicate God's grace than someone who has faced his own desperate need for it.

#### BIBLICAL CONFRONTATION STARTS WITH THE RIGHT GOALS

Once we have prepared our hearts, we can consider what God wants to accomplish when we confront someone. What is God seeking to do through our humble, loving, honest words of rebuke? The best way to answer these questions is to ask, "Why do people need to

be confronted?" The answers will direct us toward the proper set of goals.

We all need the ministry of loving, honest rebuke because of:

↘ *The deceitfulness of sin.* Sin blinds our hearts. We may have the occasional blind spot or be completely in the dark spiritually, but as long as indwelling sin exists, we need one another to help us see ourselves clearly.

↘ *Wrong and unbiblical thinking* (Num. 11; Ps. 73). None of us thinks in a purely biblical way. We hold distorted, self-aggrandizing, or self-excusing perspectives on God, others, and ourselves. We fail to properly understand our past and present, and all this shapes our behavior.

↘ *Emotional thinking.* We don't do our best thinking in the middle of suffering, difficulty, and distress. We don't think clearly when our emotions are raging. We forget what we've learned about God and ourselves when we find ourselves in trouble. It is a sweet grace to have someone come alongside us and help us remember what we need to remember.

↘ *My view of life (God, self, others, the solution) tends to be shaped by my experiences.* Because I am the one who interprets my experiences, my conclusions will be reinforced by each new situation. I will interpret each new circumstance in a way that convinces me that I am right in my way of looking at things, oblivious to the impact of spiritual blindness, sinful desires, and wrong thinking. I need the intervention of truth from someone who really loves me, who can confront and correct the distortions in my view of life.

Our loving, honest rebuke can be equal to these challenges only if we pursue two goals. The first is to be used as one of God's instruments of seeing in the lives of others. I am not trying to advance my own opinion. I want to help people see themselves in the mirror of God's Word. I want to help them see what God sees.

The second goal is to be used by God as an agent of repentance. The biblical definition of repentance is a change of heart that leads

to a change in the direction of my life. Joel 2:12-13 pictures this as not rending the garments (the external behavior of remorse in Old Testament culture), but rending the heart (heartfelt remorse for my sin accompanied by a desire to change). Our goal is not to pressure people into behavioral changes, but to encourage heart change that impacts the life. Repentance means turning to go in the other direction, and that turning must begin with the heart.

My goal is that through the things I say (message), the way I say them (methods), and the attitudes I express (character), God will change the heart of this person. Think of it! Think that God is connecting you with people so that he might complete his work in their lives! You are called to be more than a husband, wife, parent, counselor, neighbor, or friend. You have a *kingdom worker* identity. You have been chosen to pursue relationships with a sense of *redemptive calling*. You have been given the opportunity to see God miraculously transform people, up close and personal. Let that calling motivate you to give yourself to kingdom work. Look for ways to bring people to true heart repentance, and watch the harvest of change the Lord will produce.

### DON'T LEAVE THE GOSPEL AT THE DOOR

A mistake we often make when we seek to lead someone to repentance is to emphasize the law over the gospel. Yet Paul says (Rom. 2:4) that it is God's kindness (goodness) that leads us to repentance. He also says (2 Cor. 5:14) that it is the love of Christ that compels us to no longer live for ourselves, but for him. The grace of the gospel is what turns our hearts, because the gospel is God's magnificent promise of forgiveness in Christ. This draws us out of hiding into the light of truth, where true confession and repentance can take place.

Confronting people should not only confront them with failure and sin, it should also confront them with the gospel. We cannot forget this! We need to remind people of their identity in Christ (2 Peter 1:3-9; 1 John 3:1-3). We need to remind them of God's amazing



promise of forgiveness (1 John 1:5–10), and the wonderful gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:20), who gives us strength to obey. These truths give believers the courage to examine their hearts, confess their sin, and turn to Christ. If we are speaking as agents of repentance, the law is not enough. We must come with the gospel as well.

In Romans 8:1–17, Paul presents the gospel as a *comfort* and a *call*.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, be-

cause those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Paul begins by encouraging us with the *comfort* of the gospel (vv. 1–11). This comfort is rooted in two powerful realities. First, the work of Christ has removed the sentence of condemnation that was on our heads because of our sin. Jesus fully paid the penalty for our sin—past, present, and future. This comfort deals with the guilt of sin and should draw us out of the darkness of hiding and into the light of his grace. We do not need to give in to fear, denial, blame-shifting, self-righteousness, or rewriting our own history. These are all attempts at self-atonement, which is no longer needed because Christ has made full atonement for our sin. As we come to Christ in confession, we need not fear his wrath and rejection. Because Christ met the requirements of the law and died as an acceptable sin offering, we will never face condemnation! As we help people to see the gravity of their sin, we also comfort them with the fact that Christ's work has satisfied God's anger.

People need to hear the comfort of the gospel again and again. They need to be reminded of who they are in Christ and what they have received in his life, death, and resurrection. It is *not* safe to assume that a Christian who attends a good church understands this. People often live with huge gaps in their understanding of the gospel. One gap is in understanding how the comfort of the gospel radically changes our approach to life in the here and now. Daily confession of sin is essential to a gospel-driven lifestyle. It makes no sense to rationalize, blame-shift, or rewrite history to make myself look better. This is a denial of the gospel. Self-examination and confession flow out of a deep confidence that Christ's work is effective for me today. I come to him confident that he forgives me.

The second comfort of the gospel is the Holy Spirit, who lives within every believer to combat the way sin renders us incapable of doing good. Before our salvation, we were controlled by our sinful nature. We were unable to think, choose, desire, act, or speak as God ordains. But now things are different because God lives inside us! We are no longer under the control of the sinful nature. God knew that our condition was so desperate that it was not enough to forgive us. He needed to live within us in all his power, grace, and glory; so that we no longer have to live as slaves to sin's passions and desires. Because the Spirit controls our hearts, we can say "no" to sin and turn in another direction.

Paul puts it this way: "The Spirit gives life to your mortal bodies." We are now dead to the controlling power of sin and alive for the purpose of obedience. We can follow God because the Spirit gives us the life, power, and desire to obey. It is our job, as Christ's ambassadors, to take these truths to people, lest they be controlled by the fear that God requires them to do what they cannot do. Sometimes God does call people to massive life change. As one man said, "You are saying that I can no longer be me!" In a real sense, he was right. God was calling him to turn almost every area of his life in a new direction. This can be terribly intimidating unless we help people look at God's call through a gospel lens.

But this is not all that Paul wants us to understand about the gospel. The gospel is not only a comfort, it is also a call, as summarized in verses 12 through 17. Paul reminds us that the work of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit leave us with an obligation to get serious about sin and see it as God does—as a life and death matter. We have no right to say that, because we have been given blanket forgiveness, it doesn't matter how we live. To Paul, grace leaves us obligated to deal rigorously with the sin that grace addresses. If God was so serious about sin that he sacrificed his own Son and filled us with his own Spirit, how can we be any less serious about our sins of heart and behavior?

The ongoing work of God in the believer's life is to eradicate sin ("put to death the misdeeds of the body"). As a believer, I am obligated to participate in the Holy Spirit's search-and-destroy mission. I

have no right to live "according to the sinful nature" any longer. This denies the gospel and my identity as a child of God. I can never say, "I don't want to," "I would if I could," "It is too hard," or "It is okay, because I am forgiven." The only proper response to the comfort of the gospel is to accept its call and follow Christ in obedience. I am called to accept my sonship, realizing that true sons of God are those who are "led by the Spirit" and not the sinful nature.

As we root our truth speaking (confrontation and rebuke) in the gospel, our goal is that hearts would be changed by the work of Christ that the gospel declares. First, we want the promises of forgiveness and power to give people real hope for change. Second, we want the call of the gospel to cause people to accept responsibility for their sin and accept God's call to obey. The heart that has embraced both the hope (comfort) and the obligation (call) can receive honest words of confrontation. The person can see the gravity of his sin and the grandeur of God's call to obey in light of gospel truths. He is ready to live as a true child of God, as someone who can be honest about himself and follow God in faith and obedience.

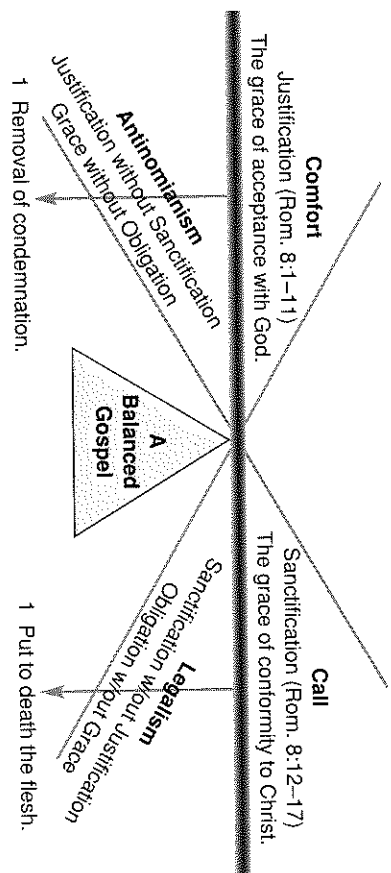
In the push and pull of personal ministry, it is easy to emphasize one side of the gospel over the other. For example, if you were talking to a husband who had verbally abused his wife for years, it would be tempting to emphasize the call of the gospel over the comfort. However, it is the comfort of the gospel that gives this man the courage to step out from behind his denials and rationalizations to confess his sin.

On the other hand, if you were talking with his wife, you might be tempted to emphasize the comfort of the gospel to the exclusion of the call. Yet it is the call of the gospel that exposes the bitterness, self-righteousness, and vengeance that are powerful temptations for those who have been sinned against. Everyone needs both sides of the gospel—all the time! These two aspects of the gospel (the grace of justification and the grace of sanctification) do not stand in opposition to each other; rather, they complement and complete each other. Together they express God's grace in Christ; they depict what the gospel produces in those who live in its light. Figure 11.1 illustrates a balanced gospel and the dangers of gospel imbalance.

How  
God  
wants  
in  
Rebuke

### A Balanced Gospel Perspective.

Fig. 11.1



This is the goal of confrontation: not to force behavioral change, but to encourage people's new natures with the gospel. We seek to open people's eyes to the full glory of Christ's grace as they see the gravity of their sin. The gospel is what turns idolaters into worshipers of God. It's what makes the self-righteous humble and willing to listen. The gospel gives practical courage to the fearful and discouraged, and helps the weak to live with confident perseverance. The gospel turns victims into helpers and the self-absorbed into those who love to serve. True biblical confrontation confronts people with much more than their sins and failures. It confronts people with Christ. He really is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life!" Hope for change always rests on him.