

Dealing With Sin in the Church: Neither Greasy Grace nor Haughty Holiness

When dealing with sin in the church, there are two ditches on either side of the road that we must avoid. On the one side is the ditch of greasy grace in which sin is minimized, overlooked and even covered up. On the other side is the ditch of haughty holiness in which the sinner is condemned without mercy. Both ditches must be avoided if we are to find spiritual health and vitality. This, however, is easier said than done.

Greasy grace is incredibly destructive since it allows a deadly spiritual cancer to spread unchecked, putting a pretty Band-Aid on a lethal disease. In the words of the Lord through Jeremiah, "They superficially treat the fracture of My poor people, saying, 'All is well! All is well!' when nothing is well" (Jer. 6:14, my translation).

Greasy grace fails to confront sin or correct the sinner, and without any real evidence of true repentance and change, it sweeps everything under the rug.

Not only is this a stench in God's nostrils, making a mockery of the blood of Jesus, but it is also a terrible disservice to the offending party who, rather than receiving life-giving and life-saving correction, is given a pat on the back and a smile. This is anything but love. The dying person is given a bill of good health.

As for those who have been sinned against, including those who suffered sexual abuse at the hands of their spiritual leaders, the situation is even worse. They are simply told to get over it. "After all, who are we to point a finger?" the compromised leaders say. "Just forgive and move on. Plus, you don't want

to hurt the ministry of this powerful man of God.”

In the worst and most extreme cases, a sexual predator is allowed to continue hurting others while the victims of abuse are now painted as the guilty parties for daring to bring an accusation against “God’s anointed.”

This is downright evil, as the victims are discarded and discounted rather than being helped and healed.

Unfortunately, it is human nature to go from one extreme to the other, in this case running from the perils of greasy grace into the arms of haughty holiness. With a self-righteous, unforgiving attitude, haughty holiness looks down on the guilty sinner, as if to say, “We would never have done what you did!” Consequently, those who fall short must be tarred and feathered.

There is no place for true repentance, no place for restoration, no place for redemption. Once pronounced guilty, you are guilty for life, branded and marked and ostracized. There is no mercy. There is no compassion. There is no empathy. Only anger, judgment and condemnation.

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You are consigned to the doghouse for good, and you can never be rehabilitated. (I actually know of pastors who were removed from leadership because of alleged pride in their lives, then given the job of church custodian to teach them humility.)

To be sure, there are sins which have lasting consequences.

If you murder someone, God can completely forgive you, but you will go to jail (or suffer the death penalty) for your crime. If you sexually abused children, even if you served time in prison, experienced a radical change of life and were truly a new person, you could never work in children’s ministry. Such

are the lasting consequences of sin.

Today, in light of one ministry scandal after another, some of which involved seriously abusive relationships, there has been much repentance and soul-searching among leaders.

Did we not listen when someone came with an accusation? Did we fail to provide a safe environment for those who had been sinned against? Did we encourage a “Don’t touch the anointed” kind of culture?

These are issues the church must get right if we are to be a safe haven for the wounded and the hurting, let alone become a holy bride worthy of God’s Son.

But how do we do this without opening the door to false accusations and slander? How do we put processes in place that will protect both the congregant who was sinned against as well as the leader who was falsely accused?

The simple principle is that serious concerns and accusations should be taken seriously, vetted in a supportive, nonthreatening environment. But then both sides must be heard equally and fairly, not presuming guilt or innocence.

That’s why biblical law required that every matter be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses, especially when a leader was being accused (see Deut. 19:15, Matt. 18:16, 2 Cor. 13:1, 1 Tim. 5:19). But it also made provision for witnesses to be vetted, with severe penalties for those who bore false witness (see Deut. 19:16-20). In that light, we should remember that the Ten Commandments forbade bearing false witness against our neighbor (Ex. 20:16), a sin that is literally detestable in God’s sight (Prov. 6:16-19).

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Let us, then, open the door to hear serious accusations and complaints without at the same time welcoming in the devil, who is the accuser of God's children.

We must also realize that, in our zeal to hear from those who have been sinned against, we have often failed to show mercy to the repentant offender, failed to be redemptive, failed to say, "There is still hope for your life!"

In some cases, of course, those who sinned grievously while in public ministry can never return to public ministry. But there can still be redemption and hope and a meaningful life for them, perhaps serving as a cautionary tale for others. And in some cases, there can be restoration to public ministry and service in humility and the fear of the Lord.

The truth is that every one of us lives by God's mercy every single day of our lives, and "judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful" (James 2:13). As recipients of mercy and forgiveness, we want to lead the way in showing mercy and forgiveness. And as those who have been the objects of redemption, we want to offer redemption to all. That is the true grace of God.

How, then, do we weave all these strands together?

First, we do not minimize or excuse sin for a moment, and under no circumstances do we sweep unrepentant sin under the rug.

Second, we create a culture and environment that is friendly to those who have been sinned against and unfriendly to those who continue in hurtful sin.

Third, where there is repentance, we offer heartfelt love and compassion, thereby offering hope and pointing the way to restoration.

This is how we reflect the character of Jesus to the world,

and this is how we demonstrate the beauty of the body of Christ.

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