

Plucking Out the Divisive Wedge in Your Relationships

There was only one time my mother-in-law and I “had words.” During my second year of marriage, in the middle of discussing an unrelated misunderstanding, my mother-in-law brought up the topic of my wedding. She didn’t have kind things to say.

As she spoke, I felt a spike of self-righteous indignation. How dare she say such unforgiving things about the day I cherished so deeply? In my hurt and anger, I flung an accusation back, saying her heart was bitter and hardened. When she immediately denied this, I zapped her with a verse that I thought settled the matter:

“For of the abundance of the heart (the) mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).

Words and Hearts

It’s true that our words betray our hearts. This verse is tagged onto a mini-parable Jesus told about trees and how there’s no such thing as a hypocritical tree. Fig trees bears figs and only figs. Thorn bushes bears thorns and only thorns. So a thorn bush cannot get away with saying it’s a fig tree because the thorns it produces prove otherwise.

Jesus said there’s no such thing as a hypocritical heart, either. An evil heart cannot get away with saying it’s good because the words it produces prove otherwise. This is the logic I used on my mother-in-law. But I didn’t realize I used it all wrong.

Years, later, when my Bible study group was studying this passage about the trees, I noticed a little connector word “for.”

“For no good tree bears bad fruit” (Luke 6:43, ESV, emphasis added).

The “for” links this paragraph to the previous one—which is the story of the guy with the log in his eye who thinks he can see clearly to remove the speck in the other guy’s eye. The log-in-the-eye guy is a hypocrite. He wanted to correct others but not himself.

Then Jesus talked about non-hypocritical trees. By linking the two images together, Jesus was saying, “If you want to avoid being a hypocrite who corrects everyone but yourself, check out your fruit. Listen to the words coming out of your mouth. Then you will know what needs to change in your heart.”

Suddenly, “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks,” had new meaning for me. Jesus wasn’t giving His people a way to zap each other in judgment. He was showing us how to avoid hypocrisy, how to judge our own hearts before we correct others.

When we think someone else is wrong, often the last thing we’re looking at is ourselves. The last thing we’re measuring is our own motives. The last thing we’re considering is our own heart. But Jesus said we should look at these things *first*.

Seeing Clearly

Though it’s been almost two decades since I quoted Luke 6:45 to my mother-in-law, I can still picture the scene perfectly—her sitting stiffly in a chair near our guestroom window and me perched on the edge of the bed near the door. Always before, when I revisited this scene, I only heard the anger in *her* words, revealing the bitterness in *her* heart. I could see with perfect clarity that she was *wrong*! Look at her thorn-bush-type words!

But now, I turned the camera of my memory back on myself. I heard the anger in *my* words and heard the bitterness of *my* heart. Look at *my* thorns! How had I been so blind to myself? I was like the log-in-the-eye guy! I was a hypocrite.

Hypocrisy

Luke 6:44 says, "Each tree is known by its own fruit." Like fruit on a tree, the words on our lips cannot lie. They tell the truth about our hearts. They help us see what our hearts are like. And yes, they help us see what other people's hearts are like too. But we need the most help, not with judging others but with judging ourselves.

Even 15 years later, my words showed me my heart. Once I was willing to inspect my own fruit, I saw my own heart. I saw my own hypocrisy. I saw my own log in my own eye. And I was so thankful! I shared with my Bible study group how God had opened my eyes to the true meaning of Luke 6:45 and how convicted I was over the way I had used the verse to judge my mother-in-law but not myself.

Susan, my group's leader, said softly, "Are you going to tell your mother-in-law? I think you should"

Clearly Susan had no idea what she was suggesting. It was one thing to confess my hypocrisy to my Bible study group. But my mother-in-law? My stomach churned at the very thought!

Uprooting Hypocrisy

Especially in the early years of my marriage, I often sensed underlying tension with my mother-in-law. I had to work through many private frustrations and hurt feelings, diligently surrendering each situation to God. After many years, with both of us carefully trying to show kindness and understanding, we had ironed things out. It hadn't been easy, but things were finally settled and peaceful between us. The

thought of dragging up the single most painful moment in our history and naming my sin from 15 years prior caused me to seriously cringe.

I cried all the way home from Bible study that day, sensing the Spirit of God prompting me to do exactly what Susan had suggested. Oh, how I dreaded it! It's quite humbling to say, "Sorry about getting it all wrong. I had a log in my eye."

Yet that was the point. God wanted me to humble myself. Owning my sin and confessing it is only way to rid myself of hypocrisy!

I pulled in the driveway and went immediately to my desk. I wrote my mother-in-law a letter, telling her about the discussion in Bible study that morning. Then I said:

I am so convicted about how I spoke to you. I was so busy pointing out the things that I saw in you, I didn't even hear how horrible I must have sounded. What an ugly, self-centered heart I had! I didn't even stop to wonder why you might be so upset. ... I didn't take the time to consider your feelings on the matter. I only focused on how ridiculous the situation seemed to me and completely exempted myself from the "log" sticking out of my own eye.

I'm very sorry for treating you this way. It's a decade or so late, but I wish I could take it back. I wish I had been more concerned with evaluating and judging the contents of my own heart rather than yours.

With the stamped letter in hand, I arrived at my mailbox just as the mail truck drove up. I was thankful I would not be able to snatch the letter back.

A week or so later, I got a letter in return. My mother-in-law opened by saying, "Well, glory be!" It was a sweet note, filled with praise to God for our relationship. That letter is

still in my desk drawer. It was the last letter I received from her, for she died just months after she sent it.

Friends, we could spend a lifetime convinced that we see with perfect clarity just how wrong someone else is. But how willing are we to look at ourselves?

Hypocrites point out the flaws in everyone else, but never themselves. Jesus invites us to do the opposite—to first look at the words coming out of our own mouths, and consider the changes that need to take place in our own hearts.

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