

Restoring a Friend to the Faith—Without Pushing Them Away From God

People who fall back into the old patterns of their life before Christ often don't need to be told what they are doing. It is counterproductive to attempt to wring a confession from them, especially if they know that we know what has happened. When the Spirit is active in a sensitive heart, human pressuring can come across as gloating, which is counteractive to successful restoration.

Most of us have experienced a defensiveness and hardening of our hearts when someone else leans on us because of sinful behavior. It is entirely normal to attempt to justify ourselves if this happens. It is far better to just move forward. Confession, if necessary, will come out a bit at a time as they are restored spiritually. It's good to bear in mind that while confession to another person can be beneficial, it isn't always necessary in the process of restoration.

When we become aware that a brother or sister has lost a battle, we can be sure that they are already aware of it. Our job, then, is to encourage them, not to condemn them. Such condemnation (even if it is only implied) could cause them to lose hope and slip even further into temptation's grip. Gentle probing on things like Christian fellowship, prayer, Bible reading, listening to Christian music, and so on are good, but only if you're prepared to actually walk with the person on their path to spiritual health.

This is simply to say, we need to be prepared to make an investment in his or her life. Instead of laying out a list of steps to follow, suggest you would be willing to meet (at

whatever frequency you can sustain) to pray together, to read together, and to hang out together. Note the key word is “together.” Sin flourishes when we are spiritually isolated. The unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace presents an impenetrable defense against the attacks of the evil one and the weakness of the flesh.

This is not to say that there is no place for confrontation. On occasion, I’ve said things like: “You’re spiritually bankrupt. How can you think of living in this world—in this battle—when your soul is empty? You’ve drained your spiritual bank account and aren’t doing anything to fill it.” However, whenever I’ve said such a thing it has been with a ready offer to be personally involved in helping top up that proverbial spiritual bank account.

We all understand the importance of physical hygiene for our own health and to keep from repelling others. I sometimes draw a spiritual analogy. When we’re generally keeping clean, a quick shower helps us stay fresh. Spiritually, reading a few verses to meditate on through the day will be enough. But if we’ve gotten into a really grimy job, we need some serious scrubbing. Spiritually speaking, sometimes it takes a long, luxurious bath in the Word of God to “deep down clean.” It will depend on the depth of your relation and whether or not you can say things such as, “You need to practice some spiritual hygiene or you’ll start to stink.”

Keep in mind in all this that unless the Holy Spirit is already at work convicting of sin and drawing your friend back to God, you’re in for a rough and potentially fruitless exercise. Sometimes a spouse or someone else will start pressing for change. This can sometimes be useful to trigger healthy spiritual motivation but, on its own, it’s not enough. As you have your initial engagement, pray the Lord will give you insight about the timing of getting involved and the depth of your involvement. Then, be responsive yourself! Pushing at the wrong time can actually slow things down. Let the Holy

Spirit direct you as you seek to restore one who has lost a spiritual battle.

One practical thing you can do for your friend is to help him or her establish some healthy boundaries in the process of “making no provision for the flesh.” They might need to not travel alone, check in for spiritual support a couple of times a day, meet with you every so many days. Every case will be different but assuring your friend that you are walking alongside will make a tremendous difference in the process of restoration.

Remember to have fun together. When everything is serious and focused on the past failure, even though you’re working together on recovering from it, people can get bogged down. So do something you like to do together, hike, watch sports, do a craft, play a game, anything to laugh together. Restoration is a key time to exercise the proverb: “a merry heart does good like medicine.”

One last thing, be patient. Spiritual failure is the result of a process. Spiritual restoration needs to be one too. {eoa}

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