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The Gospel Makes a Difference

Your phone rings late at night. The voice on the other end starts off with “I know it’s late, but I need your help.” The crisis your friend is experiencing might be one of a thousand things, but her circumstances are painful and she is reaching out to you for help. Can you help her? Do you have anything to offer her?

The Christian Counseling Educational Foundation teaches, in several of its publications, a very helpful paradigm. CCEF reminds us that we live in the middle of our circumstances. Sometimes they are pleasant, but because we live in a warped world that awaits redemption, often our circumstances are difficult. Frequently they are painful. When our circumstances are painful, we often find ourselves in crisis. In these difficult times, we might respond with fear, anger, or some other negative response.

CCEF teaches, as Scripture does, that our responses to our circumstances reveal who we are down deep inside. In the good times, we can keep a lid on our battles with sin. When life is safe, we are not afraid. When life is peaceful, we do not have to manage stress. When people affirm us, we do not have to try to justify ourselves. In Matthew 12 and Luke 6, Jesus teaches his disciples that people are like fruit trees. Good trees will produce good fruit. Bad trees will produce bad fruit. If you want to know the person, look at the fruit. Jesus then says that out of the fullness of our hearts our mouths speak. What Jesus is saying is that what we do is the direct result of who we are.

In other words, you are not angry because the driver ahead of you cut you off. You are angry because down deep inside you have anger. God is revealing your anger through your circumstances. The solution for your crisis is not to change your circumstances, so that you are able to behave in a more godly way. The solution is to recognize that you are an angry person, confess your angry heart, and ask God to change you.

Back to your late-night call. Your friend tells you that her

teenage son has been acting up lately, and as a result she got into a verbal fight with him. She said horrible things, and he stormed out of the house at midnight. She realizes that what she said was wrong, but is more focused on how to get back to a “normal” relationship with him. You know that just listening is going to help, and so you listen for fifteen minutes and then agree to meet her in the morning for coffee, prayer, and time to talk. When you get off the phone, you think to yourself, “What am I going to do tomorrow?”

You have started well. Listening is one of the best things you can do. You look over your stack of books and booklets and wonder if you have something helpful to give your friend that teaches how to deal with anger. You spend some time praying and then fall asleep.

The best help we can give to people in crisis is to creatively help them see Jesus more clearly. We do not face our life’s circumstances alone. Jesus is always with us. He is always sovereignly at work in our lives. He is more powerful than our circumstances. We need him more than we need improved circumstances. In fact, he is using our circumstances for his glory and our good.

You meet with your friend and listen to more of her story. She tells you what led up to her rage. You understand why she was provoked. The way their teen had acted really was infuriating. But instead of telling her that you would have done the same thing and that she is really OK, you help her to see that Jesus never did the same thing. Our standard for righteousness is not what others around us would do, but what Jesus did and does. Our standard is what Scripture calls

us to do. When we act badly, we grow bad fruit, as Jesus says. In these times, we have a choice to make. We can defend ourselves and continue growing bad fruit, or we can acknowledge what our hearts are really like and accept responsibility for our actions. We can repent of our sinful responses and believe the truth that Jesus is growing us by showing us who we really are. You spend time helping your friend to realize that the way she acted has more to do with her sinful heart than it does with her child's rebellion. (We will need to deal with that rebellion. The setting in which to deal with that is a conversation with the rebel and not in this conversation.)

We are not responsible for the external circumstances we face. We cannot change others. God is actively at work in those things, and we can trust them to him. However, we are responsible to deal with our own thoughts, words, and deeds. When we focus on what we do, we are focusing on the issues for which we are truly responsible. We can confess our sin. We can recognize our unbelief and repent of it. We can pray that Jesus will give us greater faith.

Your friend tells you that your willingness to meet with her has encouraged her. It feels like a weight has been lifted off her shoulders, now that she is looking at her rage and someone else has joined forces in the battle with her. She is concerned about her child and will talk with her husband about what took place. He has spoken with their teen and they have arranged a meeting later in the day to talk as a family about what happened last night. Your friend is beginning to see that she has to face her anger. As she looks at herself, she sees not only what provokes her anger, but what damage she is causing to others around her, especially her family, through her anger.

You recommend some resources that will help your friend to see what the Bible says about anger. You agree to meet with her in a week and invite her to call if things get worse.

In church today, we often put our best image forward. We create an environment in which we are best served by managing our appearances instead of honestly battling our sin. If we believe Scripture, we honestly do not need to justify ourselves. In fact, we cannot justify ourselves. Either God has justified us in Christ and our record is complete, or we are not justified at all. When we realize this, we are freed to deal honestly with the sin we do commit, and we are also freed to bear with our brothers and sisters as they honestly face the sin they commit. Our circumstances can never justify our sinful and unbelieving responses. The Bible never presents a case where sinful actions are an appropriate response to danger, pain, or rejection. Our circumstances never make sin acceptable. We are called to own our sin and know the status of our hearts. As we recognize the true state of our heart, we can confess it, turn to Christ for forgiveness, receive grace, and battle our sin.

Resources for Counseling

Many of us think that interpersonal ministry (ranging from mutual encouragement to discipleship to counseling) is best left to those who have both the training and the experience to do this ministry well. But Scripture calls us all to interpersonal ministry at some level. A quick look at your concordance will reveal how many times we are told to help out "one another."

There are many resources that can help us to succeed in interpersonal ministry. CCEF provides excellent resources on how to do this kind of ministry, including: *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, by Paul David Tripp (published by P&R); *How People Change*, by Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp (published by New Growth Press); *Speaking the Truth in Love*, by David Powlison (published by New Growth Press); and *Seeing with New Eyes*, by David Powlison (published by P&R).

Another helpful resource to equip you for interpersonal ministry is *False Intimacy*, by Harry W. Schaumburg (published by NavPress). This book addresses how to battle sexual temptations and is a great resource for those who struggle and for those who are helping them.

I also highly recommend the DVD seminar *Changing Hearts, Changing Lives* that is available at CCEF. This seminar is a tool to present both the process of personal change and how to help others to work through spiritual growth and personal change.

If you are aware of people around you who are struggling and need encouragement, please prayerfully consider how God is leading you to become involved. Please make sure you work in coordination with your church leadership and get their help as you care for your brother or sister. Look at the many commands where we are to care for "one another," and ask God to grow you as you do this necessary interpersonal ministry and honor Christ by working with him to grow his body, the church.

It is crucial for the kingdom of God that we create church environments in which we are free to face ourselves and battle sin. CCEF gives us critical tools and weapons for this battle. I encourage you to take a look at their website (www.CCEF.org) and see for yourself what resources are available. As you battle your sin, you provide an environment in which others can safely join you as allies. Together you will build Christ's kingdom and honor his name. ◻

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