

Remembering Who We Can Change

In the years since I started seminary, I've had the privilege (and the challenge) of counseling folks both from the Church and from the community. Often, such "counseling" involves simply listening to the difficulties a brother or sister has been having; reminding them of the instruction God has given us in Scripture; and praying with them.

In the course of that counseling, I've found a few common themes that cause struggles. And one of the most common has to do with the extent of our responsibility to create *change*.

Here's what we too-easily forget: *We each are responsible for repenting from our own sins.*

That sounds fairly simple, doesn't it? Yet it's a principle that is extremely easy to overlook, usually for one of two very understandable reasons.

Often, conflicts arise in our lives because a loved one is embracing a sin which clearly will be hurtful to him or her. The nature of the sin is immaterial. Whether the sin involves a physical danger (like drinking to drunkenness or befriending dangerous people) or is purely a spiritual danger (like failing to attend Church or refusing to profess Christ), when we see a loved one putting themselves in danger, *we want to change them.*

That's the nature of love. Love "does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." Love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor. 13:6-7). Because we love them, we want to protect them from evil – even if that causes damage to our relationship.

But here's the problem: I can't change you. You can't change me. Neither of us has access to the "control panel" of another person's heart.

Only God can change the heart of those whom we love.

But until we understand and accept that fact, there *will* be conflict.

A second type of conflict involves those who hurt us. Whether a spouse, a sibling, a co-worker, a neighbor or something else, someone is causing us pain – and we want them to stop. Sure, we want them to stop for their own good. But even more desperately, we want them to stop for *our* sake.

But again: Neither you nor I can change the hurtful person.

Only God can change them. Only He can make them stop causing hurt.

And again: until we understand and accept that fact, there *will* be conflict. What's more, until we entrust that hurtful person into the hand of God, it is *very* likely that we will increase the hurt – because our efforts to change the person create more anger, disagreement, or distrust.

So what *can* we do when someone around us is acting in ways that are sinful or hurtful? God has not left us without instruction, even in this.

First of all, we need to love each other. If they are hurting themselves with their sins, they need our love – and without our love, they will *never* listen to our counsel. If they are hurting *us* with their sins, they have – at least in some sense – made themselves our enemies. According to Jesus (Matt. 5:44-48; Luke 6:27-38), that's all the more reason to love them.

(Note: *Loving* our enemy doesn't mean we must allow them to continue hurting us. If someone is hitting you, it's not unloving to get out of range or to defend yourself. See Luke 22:36; Ex. 22:2.)

But our love must be *real* love – *Godly* love, like we find in 1 Cor. 13:4-7.

The love that comes from God doesn't accuse, doesn't demand, doesn't retaliate. God's love doesn't play by the rules of the world. God's love never assumes the worst – yet it persists even when the worse happens.

Along with *love* goes *prayer*.

Only God can change the heart – so to God we must appeal! Bring to Him your concerns, your fears, your sorrows about the other person. And let them become *His* concern. Pray for your errant loved ones, your nasty neighbors, your hurtful acquaintance. Pray *fervently* and *frequently*.

Then *encourage* them to do what is right.

Notice what I actually said there. I said *encourage* – not demand or coerce. And I said we should encourage them to do *what is right* – that is, what *God* says is right. Not what I or society thinks is right.

That means encouraging them on the basis of Scripture and in the name of Christ (Col. 3:16). It means speaking the truth with them (Eph. 4:25) and asking them to submit to God, for the sake of their very soul (James 5:19-20).

If they profess to be Christians, we should follow the path of Luke 17:3-4 and Matt. 18:15-18 – lovingly confronting them about their sin, bringing witnesses if necessary, and eventually taking it to the shepherds of the Church.

But still: We can't change them. We can *ask* them to change, and we can show them why they *should* change. But we cannot alter their hearts.

We *can*, however, live before them as *examples*.

This point is often missed. How many times I've heard: "I would do _____, if only he/she would do _____."

Listen: If God calls you to act or speak in a certain way, then you are called to *obey God* – regardless of how those around you act. Refusing to obey God is a sin, and your sin will not – *ever* – lead those around you to obey God.

Instead, live before them as an example. *Show them* how obedience to God *looks* and *acts* and *talks* and *loves*. Pray for them. Encourage them to do what is right, in the way God has instructed you. Love them endlessly.

And believe that God *can* change the hearts of those who sin *before you* or *against you*. Believe, and don't doubt, that He can soften their heart of stone.

After all, He softened *yours!*