



## **Lesson 9            Apply Correct Theology**

Christians – especially Reformed Christians – should apply theology in our relations with one another. In this message I will highlight three doctrines that affect our relationships – the doctrine of sin, the doctrine of adoption, and the doctrine of grace.

First, we are sinners. Do not be surprised when your Christian brother sins. Do not be surprised when you sin. If you can accept that sin dwells within you and your brother, you will be sober minded in dealing with conflict. NonChristians are sometimes better able to handle conflict because they have more realistic expectations. They expect the workplace to have its share of conflicts and that they just need to deal with it.

Christians, on the other hand, are appalled that a brother or sister could act "that way." "A real Christian wouldn't do that!" We are usually shocked for one of two reasons (perhaps both): the offense of the other is against us; or the offense is one that we "would never do." "How could my brother commit a sin that I don't commit? What's wrong with him?"

What's wrong with him is what's wrong with all of us – sin is still in us. The "old man" may have been killed when we came to Christ, but his remains are still in us and will not be completely removed until our entry into glory. Meanwhile, we must deal with sin in others and in ourselves. Sin should grieve and anger us, but it should not shock us.

So understand that Brother Bob or Sister Sue will get testy at times; Joe will act like his "old self" occasionally and that Sally will revert to her old selfish ways now and then. These messages have tried to help you deal with sin; but you cannot address sin effectively if you continually allow it to set you up for a punch. So expect a person with a temper to express that temper; expect Christians placed in awkward situations to act awkwardly; they will get stressed; they will act in self-defense and in selfish ways. They should not act sinfully, but they will. Will you be prepared when they do?

My job is a bit like being a security official. It is my job to spot where conflict may arise. A new event is proposed. All right, will it conflict with some other activity that may cause ruffled feathers? What do we need to do to communicate properly so there will not be misunderstanding and thus gossip? Who is most likely to take offense? And the questions go on. Basically, I try to anticipate the gaps where sin may creep in. In other words, I expect sin; I expect good, godly people to sin in their reactions to sin and



difficulty. I expect kind people to make hurtful remarks and patient people to get flustered. I expect wise people to make judgment errors and charitable people to show irritation. I expect people saved by grace and who revel in the redemption of Christ to be judgmental. I believe that we all have logs in our eyes that blind us to what is obvious to others.

We all bring baggage into our relationships. We bring it into the church, into our marriages, into dating relationships, the workplace, school, home – everywhere. We struggle with varying sins. Some of us have trouble controlling our tempers, resulting in public outbursts. Some of us have trouble being dependable; we are late to meetings; we fail to keep commitments. Some of us are poor at planning and regularly create last minute crises for ourselves and others. Some of us are thoughtless in how we impose on the goodwill of others. Some of us take advantage of others out of self-interest, while some of us out of the same motive let others take advantage of us.

We should not behave this way, but we do. People in the church have always done so. Another phrase that catches my eye from the Ephesians 4 passage is in verse 2, "bearing with one another in love." The very fact that Paul calls Christians to bear with one another acknowledges that there are shortcomings to bear. If all were meek and gentle, kind and charitable, there would be nothing to bear. We would be told simply to enjoy one another. But just as we may have bodily aches and pains to endure (as I am increasingly finding), so we will have the same in the church body.

The doctrine of adoption holds that you are a child of God, my brother or sister in Christ Jesus. It follows that I should encourage you to grow in maturity in Christ. So when you cause yet another problem in the church out of your sin specialties, I must address you not merely with the objective to sort out the mess you've caused, but to help you in your walk with Christ. In the end, I know that God will not question me about how well I sorted out space problems and got through another church event. He will ask me about the people under my care. He will want to know if I helped them along the way to spiritual maturity, if I encouraged them in their trials. Did I encourage them? Did I help them – beyond getting their work done – to see the blessing of God in this church? Did I encourage them so that they want to be with God's people and serve them?



You are a child of God, which means that you matter more than schedules and events. We do not take the view of the world that expects individuals to be crushed so great things may be accomplished. This means that beyond helping your ministry take place, I must think about what is best for you. I cannot hold on to you to keep a ministry going, if indeed it is detrimental to your welfare; nor can I bump you out to save me some trouble. I must care about what is for your good.

If I keep these truths in perspective – that you are a sinner and that you are a child of God – I am more likely to think through how to handle any given situation. I will neither overreact to your sin, nor treat you in casually and tritely.

A question always to ask yourself in addressing a person's sinful behavior is "What is your aim?" That is a heart issue. And because you know theologically (not hypothetically) that you are a sinner, you know you must keep examining your motive. You may think that your aim is to help the other person, when it really is to make that person less troublesome to you or to get him to be good to you. A wife says that she is concerned for her husband's struggle with an addiction, when her real concern centers on herself. She is offended by his failure to be a good husband to her. The result is that she resorts to methods of "help" that in reality are expressions of her anger and distrust. She is shocked to find him not merely a sinner, but a sinner against her. A husband may think that he is concerned for the welfare of his wife, that he is trying to care for the spiritual condition of the child of God for whom he is responsible. In reality he wants a wife who is responsive to him to satisfy his desires.

Don't be blind to yourself as a sinner who hurts others, especially those closest to you. We all admit freely that we are sinners whom God deals with by grace. But we view ourselves as sinners in the abstract. We don't see how hurtful we are because, as Jack Nicholson would say, "You can't handle the truth!"

Expect sin; remember that your sinful brother or sister is a child of God; finally, exercise the theological truth that is the most significant in your life – grace. You are saved by grace. Presently you live by the grace of God who has chosen each day to grant you mercy rather than the judgment you deserve. It is Christ's righteousness that covers your sin, and that covering was given to you by grace. Let that theological understanding guide you in how you relate to others.



How does it guide you? It leads you to bear with one another as you overlook small offenses. It leads you to desire good in others. It leads you to forgive seventy times seventy. If you grasp the grace shown to you – if you delight in the grace shown to you – and act from that vantage point, then the wisdom needed to deal with problems and problem people that come your way will spring up in you.

Ultimately, our theology – what we really believe about God and his relation to us – is what will drive our behavior. Don't let good theology be only textbook deep. Make it heart-felt deep; use it to examine your heart and drive your relations with God and his children.