

## Rights, Wrongs, and Misunderstandings by Pastor Marty

I began the monthly newsletters last year with a discussion of the necessity of our practicing the presence of God to develop a full relationship with Him; I ended the year with a two-part newsletter about what it means that God created us masculine and feminine. When I finished December's issue, I planned on starting this year with a related topic, building on those. However, things do not always work out the way we plan—sometimes due to our own choices, sometimes because of circumstances, and sometimes because God steps in to move us in a different direction. In my case, deviating from that plan is a little bit of all three reasons. I take care to write as I feel directed, imperfect as it may be, and I try to never put out these messages without a sense of inspiration. (Now you know why they sometimes come at the beginning of a month and sometimes at the end). For anyone who preaches, teaches, or has any involvement in proclamation, it is normal for current events to inspire a message, and it does seem that sometimes God would have His people speak about things that are fresh on their hearts. As any pastor's spouse will attest, it does not take a lot to become part of a sermon illustration. Thus is a newsletter born.

***God often uses events in our lives to give inspiration for what we should do or say.***

In the last week, I have had two major conflicts within relationships. This is enough to inspire a very important message. Now, I often hear people say that bad news comes in threes. I do not say that because I do believe there are statements we make that can become curses and pronouncements over our lives; if we get in the habit of saying that evil comes in threes, then every time we experience two bad things, we start expecting a third—and expectation is a huge part of faith. Jesus said we would have

trouble in this world, and He was not wrong; however, we do not need to invite it any more or any faster than it already appears. What we expect in our lives not only affects our outlook, emotions, and experiences but also can have a spiritual effect on what we receive from God.

***What we expect in our lives can affect our emotions, outlook, and experiences.***

Of course, I am not going to get into the specifics of the conflicts because they are not relevant to this message. What is relevant is that they were extremely different in degree and theme. As I considered them and what was said, I began to think relationship conflicts can be divided into four general categories: (1) person A wrongs person B, (2) person B wrongs person A, (3) persons A and B wrong each other, or (4) nobody wrongs anybody. The problem with this terminology is that it leads to further problems. For example, if nobody has wronged anybody, why does a conflict exist? Also, where do we fit it when person A is wronged while person B never did anything wrong? (If you don't believe this is possible, talk to your parents). Additionally, our language can give us a false understanding of what "wrong" means. Sometimes, we can feel hurt or angry at something and falsely believe it is black and white—either it is or is not the way we interpreted it. The key is our interpretation may be incorrect or incomplete, but that does not make us wrong and the other person right or vice versa; it simply means we are imperfect people in a very imperfect world—and as radical as it sounds, I suggest this even applies to the Church. Mistakes, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings are part of this reality.

***Misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and mistakes are part of our world.***

Of course, there is no denying that there are times when a person intentionally wrongs another person. We only need to turn on the news to see endless examples that prove we all have a fallen nature. In some cases, one person is wrong and another innocent, and sometimes, nobody is completely innocent. When there is an intentional wrong, repentance is expected of the guilty parties; however, we know that even when the guilty parties never repent, we must still offer forgiveness for the sake of our own emotional, spiritual, and psychological health. In some cases, however, there are accidental wrongs—wrongs that were not fully intentional and purposeful. Several Church liturgies include the confession “for what we have done and left undone” because sometimes our wrongs are in what we neglected to do. Human beings do not always realize, understand, or remember what to do, and that is very different from something as purposeful as theft, assault, or adultery. It is in this area that we get into issues that aren’t as “black and white” as we may perceive them. I remember a time when a person forgetting my birthday was a clear indication of rejection and not caring about me as a person; not only do I realize that this is not true, but I myself am almost supernaturally bad at being able to remember other people’s birthdays—even very good friends. This is where we get into the idea that one person can be wronged when another person never actually did something wrong . . . at least not to the extent that it is experienced.

***A person can be wronged even when no one actually intended anything wrong.***

My focus in this newsletter is on the times when the issues are more foggy and gray and less black and white—the times when one person feels wronged while the other did not purposefully intend a wrong. I would suggest that a majority of conflicts within relationship between Christians fall into this category. I am not discounting the numerous instances of very

intentional wrongs, but I do believe the number of unintentional wrongs is so high that it far surpasses those. I will use myself as a prime example of this type of wrong. Anybody who has known me for more than a few years can attest that I was someone who was very easily offended. If I could go a full week in which I did not feel hurt or slighted by another person, I was doing very well. However, the worst thing was that I could never let go of those feelings of being hurt or offended. When an offense would occur, I would almost always feel that the other person had wronged me, which I interpreted as doing wrong—at least to some extent. What I have learned, however, is that it is impossible to find people who are so perfectly aware of other’s thoughts and feelings every moment of every day that they can always tell the right thing to do. Only God can be that omniscient.

***Only God knows the perfectly right thing to do every single moment of every day.***

During this time, I was doing one thing right: I was learning how to communicate in an appropriate manner. Of course, it did not start that way. I would make assumptions about the motivations, thoughts, and feelings of others based upon how the situation appeared to me. I was equating my feelings about a situation with the reality of the situation. If I felt that a certain person had ignored me, then clearly the person had ignored me. The one thing that made the situation far worse was that I felt that I had spiritual discernment: I could tell what was really going on in the situation. Now, there are times when I hear from God, and there were many times back then that I did hear from God. However, I had to learn that no matter how much it sounded like God’s voice, if my own feelings were involved, there was potential for error—and the more my feelings were connected to the situation, the greater the likelihood of error. I absolutely believe in the gifts of discernment, but as imperfect human

beings, we all have blind spots. The definition of a blind spot is something we cannot see, and anyone who says they do not have a blind spot is revealing their blind spot. As I have written about before, pride is invisible to those who are proud; in the same way, a person who does not accept that they make mistakes is making one of the biggest ones. Until we have become truly mature, we cannot trust our ability to discern and interpret the actions of others when our own feelings or circumstances are involved, and this is especially true for someone who is easily offended. Thankfully, I began to learn better communication skills: I learned to ask neutral questions and express my feelings in ways that did not imply any specific intention to the other person. I began to discover there were times when my interpretation of an event did not line up with the reality of the event. I realized the only ones who truly know what another person feels or thinks is God and that other person.

***The only ones who really know the heart of another person is God and the person.***

Communicating with neutrality is not an easy thing to do. It means if the other person says they did not mean something, I have to accept that as true no matter how strongly I feel otherwise. Everything inside me may be absolutely certain, but to act on that feeling without confirmation places me in a position of being an authority and judge of the person. I suggest there are only three instances when it is valid to believe a personal interpretation instead of the person's own word: (1) when the person has shown a habit of being dishonest, (2) when believing the person would be staying in an unhealthy situation, and (3) when God or others continue to confirm that interpretation. It is not easy to believe another person when it means we are wrong, but thus grows humility. However, each of these conditions can be more complicated than they seem. For example, we may know a person to be relatively honest, but

that does not mean the truth is guaranteed; only God is absolutely and completely unable to lie. Additionally, there are times when we all might do things from certain motives without consciously realizing it, and it takes time for God to show us the true depths of our hearts. What do we do if we suspect the person is consciously (or even unconsciously) not telling us the truth? Love says that we believe all things, so we take the person's word at face value . . . but we do so with wisdom: we put the situation in God's hands and allow Him to convict the other person—as we do with forgiveness—while we take any necessary steps to protect ourselves from repeated harm.

***We put the situation in God's hands, trusting Him to convict the other person.***

I use the word "repeated" here because it makes a significant difference in how we are to respond. If a person lies to us once, that is very different than someone who repeatedly takes advantage of our trust. Scripture instructs us to guard our hearts, so we are obligated to do what we need to do in order to stay healthy. Our relationship with God is greater than any other relationship, and putting ourselves in bad situations is disrespecting and devaluing His love and care for us—as well as enabling others to continue in behavior that is harmful to them. Allowing ourselves to be treated in a way that we would not allow another to be treated is not wisdom or loving what God loves. Therefore, we balance our believing the other person with the seriousness of the situation. Additionally, we need to consider the input of others. We may find that we have every reason to believe what the person says, but others are telling us otherwise. In that situation, we must evaluate those other factors. Except on television, the person found standing over the dead body and holding the bloody knife is usually guilty. When we have sufficient evidence or the reliable witness of others who exhibit wisdom and solid

discernment, it can be foolish to continue to believe without a very good reason to do so.

***Wisdom dictates that our trust must be suited to the seriousness of the situation.***

However, such situations usually involve definite wrongs that are more obvious than our present topic. We are discussing those conflicts involving interpretations and motivations. As an example, let's consider a husband forgetting his anniversary. (Wives can also forget, but if we are going to be realistic, husbands do so more). The act of forgetting such an important date seems like a relatively black-and-white event. However, until the husband actually admits to forgetting, it is still an assumption. For instance, maybe the husband spent \$2000 on a cruise to take them both to a Caribbean island, but due to a barnacle infestation, the trip was cancelled the very morning he was going to surprise her with the tickets. Feeling horrible and anxious, he realized there was little he could do because he had put all his money into the gift, but the company won't be able to refund the money until the next week. He could feel so terrible that he doesn't know how to tell his wife, and he may even feel like such a failure that he tries to avoid admitting what happened, and the day passes with no mention of the anniversary. The wife's assumption that he had forgotten about the anniversary was not actually true. Granted, this is a sitcom scenario, but it reveals how the interpretation of one person can be faulty even though it seemed factual. When we then begin to speak about motives and intentions, we get even more removed from fact—such as if the wife interpreted the husband's forgetting as a sign that he does not truly value her. Even if he did forget, assigning meaning to the situation is illegitimate until it has been confirmed by him. In our stressful world, accidents just happen.

***Even when the facts are confirmed, it is illegitimate to assign meaning ourselves.***

The important thing to realize at this point is that the personal interpretations we make in these situations—and the argument we are then tempted to present—are usually diametrically opposed to what we actually want to be true. We feel hurt because we interpret the action as meaning we are unimportant to the other person; however, nobody wants to be unimportant to a significant person in our life. We are secretly hoping that there some other mysterious-but-feasible explanation. We do not always realize this dichotomy, but it is there. If that were the only issue, things would still get resolved much easier than they do now. Why is there a problem? We have a fallen nature with blind spots. One of those blind spots is that we hate to be accused, to be wrong, and to make mistakes. This leads to confrontations in which both parties secretly want to be wrong while they simultaneously become defensive and feel threatened at the idea of being wrong.

***We secretly want to be wrong while we vehemently argue to prove we are right.***

This is where our terminology is at fault. We need to begin to see and understand that confrontations between people—whether it is family, friends, coworkers, or other people in the seats next to us at church—are not about anyone being wrong or right; it is about gaining understanding, correcting faulty interpretations of events, and learning to love others better. If we have the humility to recognize the extent of our pride, then we are able to accept that many of our interpretations and assumptions are not equivalent with reality; as this revelation begins to inform our understanding, conflicts become opportunities to communicate with others with the intention of finding we were mistaken instead of trying to prove the worst. Of course, we recognize that sometimes we may learn, as Job did, that what we feared has come upon us. It is in those specific situations we resort to the most powerful tool we possess: forgiveness.