

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup>If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." Luke 17:3

Wherever people get together there will be sin. We are sinners. We make mistakes. We hurt each other. Some of this we do on purpose. Some of it we do because we are not paying attention to what is most important in life, loving God and loving our neighbour. Little kids sin against each other. So do the elderly in nursing homes. People who did not finish high school and people who have Phds sin against each other. Christians and people of other faiths and atheists and agnostics sin against each other.

Wherever people get together there will be sin.

These words from Jesus tell us what to do when people sin against us. Especially when those close to us sin against us. 'Brothers' is short hand for people who are part of your church.

If sin is a hazardous waste, Jesus wants us to know how to neutralize it and get rid of it.

If sin is a spark that can explode into a fire that can burn a house down, Jesus wants us to know how to extinguish it.

This is not the entire teaching on how to respond to sin. It assumes that the person who sins against us listens to us and asks for forgiveness. Matthew 18 shows us what to do if they will not listen or change.

Since we are listening to this text as part of a series on marriage, let's play with it a bit.

Wives, this is how you are to hear it: ““If your husband sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup>If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.”

Husbands, here is God’s word for you: ““If your wife sins, rebuke her, and if she repents, forgive her. <sup>4</sup>If she sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive her.”

Now let’s go through these verses in closer detail.

If your husband or wife **sins against** you.... The word for “sins against” is ‘hamartano’ and means, “misses the mark”. If this person lets you down, disappoints you, fails to come through as husband or as wife for you in the way they have committed to... (here is one example of how we can miss the mark)

If you were married in the Christian Reformed Church and used the vows in the hymnal, one of the promises you made to each other as a solemn vow before God and all of the people gathered to witness your wedding is this one, “I will encourage you to develop the gifts that God has given you.”

It is a great line and a very powerful one. If we are partners in life with people who will encourage us to reach out farther than we dare, who will be honest with us about our gifts and our blind spots and who will have our backs when we fail, we can really grow. This doesn’t mean that our spouses have to say ‘yes’ to every idea we come up with, nor does it mean that they will blindly keep pushing us into things we are not cut out for. But we promise to each other to encourage our husband, our wife to unpack the gifts that God has given to them and become the person that God has called them to be.

So Michelle wants to go back to school and become an X-ray technician or a teacher or a heavy duty mechanic. Steve is happy with life as it is. Every time she raises an idea, he shoots it down or finds some reason that it just won't work. He's forgotten about his promise. He's missing the mark, he's sinning against his wife.

At this point, she has several options. She can secretly make her own plans, she can complain to her friends and family, she can give up on Steve, she can give up on her dreams, she can start to bargain and do things like use sex as a bargaining tool, or keep dropping hints or nag.

Or, she can do what Jesus recommends.

She can rebuke him:

**Rebuke** – epitimao. Here's the definition. *To blame, censure, chide, rebuke, warn or berate. It is an abrupt, curt or biting charge, pointedly expressing disapproval, the taking to task of someone for a fault, and connotes a sharp or harsh tone. It implies a warning is involved in confronting an undesired action which one hopes to curb.*

That is pretty strong stuff.

It does not mean that we get nasty or hurtful with each other. It would be good to get out that checklist from last Sunday and pray for wisdom too.

It does mean that we need to dare to speak directly to each other when we are sinned against. So much damage is done when we let things go on and on and on until finally we have drifted far from each other. A clear rebuke says, "this relationship is important to me".

Would you agree that we have the same problem in other areas of our lives? We put up with way too much from each other because we do not dare to rebuke each other. Maybe we are conflict avoiders. No one wants a fight.

In Galatians 2 you can read about how Paul confronted Peter in front of everyone else because Peter had started to pull back from including the Gentiles in his circle. Paul's rebuke made sure that the church would be a welcome place for all of us Gentiles.

If you have been rebuked you will remember it. I was 15 or 16 and was giving my pastor's son a hard time for being a pastor's son. It was really stupid of me and I am still kind of embarrassed about doing that. We were standing by the bench of the Perry Street Arena in Woodstock, Ontario when he looked me right in the eye and said, "F right off!"

I've never forgotten that moment. I was being a jerk and this was a clear message of rebuke.

So assuming you have rebuked your wife and she **repents.....**

Repentance does not mean saying, "I'm sorry". Repentance means, "stops doing 'a' and starts doing 'b'". It means a 'u-turn'. Repentance is to say, 'you are right, I have missed the mark and I will focus better, aim better, try harder'.

Repentance is such a key part of this whole equation. It is the sinner's job. And repentance does not mean flowers, a dinner, a gift. Repentance means taking full responsibility for our behaviour. Not blaming anyone else or denying or minimizing but stepping up to the plate, shouldering the blame and walking in

a different and new direction. Repentance means exploring and trying to understand the hurt our sin has caused. Ask, “what was it like for you when I .....

If I put down your dreams and gifts what was that like for you? A step farther, repentance might mean being willing to make a sacrifice of our own time or energy so that our spouse can be free to take a course. It might mean exploring why we are so afraid to let our partner grow. It might mean a lot of different things. It might mean asking, “what can I do to help you?” It might mean listening to the ideas and dreams of our partner.

But repentance will always mean something concrete, something for us to stop doing and something for us to start.

If your spouse repents, forgive him, forgive her.

It has taken us a bit to get to forgiveness in this sermon. That’s not an accident. The hard work of an honest rebuke and the hard work of repentance are terribly important to the work of forgiveness.

One of the most important things we need is to be understood. If we forgive without ever daring to rebuke we may find it very hard to forgive in a way that feels like forgiveness to us.

As well, if there is no repentance, the forgiveness is not connected to a specific action or hurt, and that will make forgiveness that much more difficult.

The word is *aphiemi*. It means ‘release from obligation’. It is a word used to pardon or forgive debts or faults.

The opposite of forgiveness is to hold on to our hurt as a grievance. Forgiveness says, "this will not come between us anymore". I will not dwell on what you have done to me anymore.

When the sin has been about something that really matters to us and the hurt is deep, it can be difficult to forgive.

The model for us is Jesus. In Colossians 3 Paul writes, "forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Three stories yet on forgiveness in marriage:

The first thing we will need to forgive our spouses for in our marriages, is for not being the perfect marriage partner we had thought they would be. A couple from my first congregation are both with Jesus now. Her first husband had died very shortly after they were married. I don't think he even had time to have morning breath or to fart in bed. She married her second husband soon after. A pretty good guy, but he could not compete with someone who was now dead. She never seemed to forgive him for having any faults at all. It made for a long unhappy marriage.

Another couple, another story. Their first son was a strapping eight pounds, born about five months after their wedding. They never celebrated their anniversary because of their guilt and shame over having conceived their child before the wedding. Their guilt and their shame trickled over onto their son. They just could not accept the forgiveness of God and move on in his grace.

And one more. Close friends of ours found their marriage floundering. She had an affair and became pregnant by another man. Despite that, they rebuked, repented, forgave and reconciled and they are now raising their youngest daughter as a gift from God in their family of five kids.