

Imperfect Christians aren't Bad Christians

When a child spills some milk what do you do? Do you yell and scream at him as if he is a worthless, flawed failure? I hope not. That little child is imperfect and makes mistakes. To treat him like he has no value or is less than because he makes a mistake is not good. Instead, show him how to clean up his mess. Talk him through how and why the mess was made so he might avoid the same mistake in the future.

What about when a child says a cuss word? Do you yell and scream at her as if she is a worthless, flawed failure who is making you look like a bad parent? I hope not. That child is imperfect and makes mistakes. To treat her like she has no value or is less than because she makes a mistake is not good. Instead, you talk to her about language. You help her establish boundaries for the kinds of words she uses and strive to pass on your values regarding the words we speak.

That makes sense to us regarding our kids. But what about our brethren? What about members of our congregation? What do we do when we know one of our brethren lied, lusted, cheated, stole, etc.? Do we yell and scream at them as if they are worthless, flawed failures who are making your church look bad? Do we shame them, making them jump through hoops to feel forgiven? Do we treat them as if they are less than? Do we look down on them as if they aren't quite as spiritual as us? I hope not. That brother or sister is imperfect. They make mistakes. They will sin. To treat them like they are less than, to shame them, to bitterly and harshly treat them is just not good. How dare we who are just as imperfect and just as sinful treat our brethren as if we are better than they are when we talk to them about their sins?

Perhaps this is why Paul told us to restore those caught in any trespass with gentleness (**Galatians 6:1**).

Certainly, if someone is living in utter rebellion, strong rebuke may become necessary. However, to treat other growing Christians as if they are bad Christians just because they aren't perfect (just like we aren't perfect) is wrong. Do you know what Jesus did for that brother or sister when He learned about their sins? He died for them.

Think about that the next time you need to talk to a brother or sister about sin in their life. That may help you talk to them God's way.

"But," someone replies, "What about Paul in **Galatians 2:11-14**? He withstood Peter to his face. Shouldn't we do the same?"

I'm glad you asked that wonderful question. Let's consider exactly what Paul did here and make sure we aren't reading into the text our own potential emotions and tones of voice. We can easily read a harsh and mean tone into what Paul said. But then again, maybe that's not how Paul said it. After all, he reports this case in the same letter that he says we should restore those who have sinned with gentleness.

Does "I opposed him to his face" mean Paul got up in Peter's face, finger pointing, spit flying, accusation hurling? Not necessarily. The word simply means that Paul resisted Peter. That is, Paul did not go along with Peter's behavior. Additionally, he did it to his face, not behind his back. Paul didn't covertly go behind Peter's back telling everyone else what Peter did wrong; he actually talked to Peter about it.

But why? Was this to publically embarrass Peter and shame him into submission? No, it is because Peter's behavior was impacting others. They had all committed the same transgression. Paul addressed the "ringleader," if you will, in front of the followers because they all needed to hear this same statement.

Also, notice his words. Paul didn't say, "When are you ever going to get it, Peter? Look at what an unspiritual Christian you really are. You don't see me doing this, do you? You better shape up and fly right or you're going to hell and you'll take everyone with you. And you call yourself an apostle?!" Instead, he asked a question: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (ESV). Notice Paul didn't simply demand that Peter shape up. Rather, he asked a question to get Peter to see his own inconsistency and help Peter think through his sinful actions and correct them based on his own thinking through the issues.

Further, it doesn't seem that Paul holds this against Peter for the rest of his life, acting as if Peter was a second class Christian because he made a mistake sometime in the past. Paul knew himself to be the chief of sinners. He recognized that he had no right to sit in the place of the perfect doling out God's judgments on people. Rather, he was a fellow imperfect traveler who still had the responsibility to help his brethren. That's what he did. And, it appears to me, he did it with gentleness.

Looking from both sides helps us see two mistakes we often make when dealing with someone's sins. Let's go back to our child illustration to make the point.

Some parents, when a child makes a mistake simply blow it off saying, "They're just kids." They don't talk to their kids at all about the spilled milk or the foul language. Thinking the kids are too immature to understand, they never pass on good boundaries to the kids. This doesn't help them grow at all. However, at the other end of the spectrum, some parents absolutely blow up at their kids, berating them as fools, perhaps beating them out of embarrassment. This doesn't help the child grow either.

We must make sure we don't take either of these approaches with our brethren. When someone has sinned, don't ignore it. But don't beat them up either. Gently restore them like Paul did with Peter.