

they were impressed that God loved their son enough to expose his sin. The fact that Frank had needed to use the computer that evening, the fact that the e-mail “just happened” to come in from Ryan’s friend, and the fact that Ryan was not home when things were uncovered were all part of God’s plan of rescue. God the Redeemer had reached down to stop Ryan from continuing on the path he had begun. And God was calling Frank and Ellen to be part of what he was doing in Ryan’s life at that moment.

This realization filled Frank and Ellen with joy and hope even in the midst of their hurt and sadness. These perspectives gave them a whole new set of things to say to Ryan, and a completely different way to say them. They imagined what the scene would have been had Ryan been home when Frank discovered the e-mails. Frank would have exploded in anger, Ryan would have exploded back or retreated into defensive silence, and none of the good that God brought out of the situation would have taken place. The next morning Frank woke up and sat on the edge of the bed as he spoke to Ellen:

It hit me this morning, honey. None of this is about us. This is God’s moment; we are just here as his instruments. I was thinking as I was lying here that Ryan really isn’t ours. He belongs to God. God placed him in our hands so that we can be God’s tools in his life. I’m hurt and I know you are too, but this is a wonderful opportunity to talk to Ryan about the most important things in life. Maybe this will sound funny, but it hit me that this is a *redemptive* moment. That’s what God is doing in Ryan’s life. He’s working to rescue Ryan from sin and death. He is not allowing Ryan to be successful at his sin. He let it be exposed. God stuck it in our face, not so we would be depressed and discouraged, but so we would be his instruments of redemption in Ryan’s life. It is so important that we handle this thing God’s way! We can’t let our hurt and anger get in the way of what God is doing. I am so glad we’ve had time to think and pray before we talked to Ryan.

They had their talk with Ryan that evening. And it didn’t begin with Frank sticking the e-mail in Ryan’s face and saying, “How dare you do this to me, you sneaky little punk!” Rather, Frank started by asking Ryan if they could pray before they talked. Immediately Frank had Ryan’s attention. He had never done this before! Frank then told Ryan the two things he was feeling that night. The first was sadness at the thought of Ryan’s deception and sin. The second was joy, because the whole situation pictured so clearly how much God loved Ryan and how actively he was working to rescue him from sin. He told him that at the end of it all, he hoped Ryan would be overwhelmed with the love of God. It was a long conversation and a very late night, but a real turning took place in Ryan’s heart that evening. And not only in Ryan’s—there was a turning in Frank’s heart as well. When Frank later told me the story, he captured the change within himself very well.

For the first time, I began to think *redemptively* about the relationships around me. It hit me that if God was using this situation to do his work in Ryan, then he was doing the same in Ellen and our other children—and me. It’s given me a whole new perspective on my family—and not just my family, but my friendships too. I realized that how I handle

situations—what I say—is very important. Either I am taking control and handling things in the way that seems best to me, or I am responding in a way that makes me part of what God is doing through the circumstance.

What a nice way to capture it! We all need a *redemptive perspective* on our relationships. Before we speak, we need to ask ourselves what the Redeemer would be pleased to accomplish in the situation, and we need to be committed to be a part of it. We are meant to be on his mission. It’s in the workroom of everyday life that God builds faithful, godly, and mature children, and we are the tools he uses. When Frank and Ellen got hold of this perspective, it completely transformed the way they dealt with their son’s sin.

The lesson Frank learned is our subject here. To speak as Christ’s ambassadors, we must understand God’s mission and how it offers us practical guidance for the things we face with family, friendships, and the body of Christ.

It’s Been His Mission from the Beginning

From the first moments of sin’s existence on the earth, God’s response has been redemption. This is clear in his words to the Serpent after the Fall—“I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (*Gen 3:15*). In other words, God says, “I will not leave things as they are. Through the woman I will bring a Redeemer who will crush you and your work through his own suffering.” God’s response to Satan’s lies and Adam and Eve’s rebellion is not only to judge, but to redeem. Here God introduces the plan that unfolds throughout the rest of Scripture. The Bible is the story of God’s work to redeem a people for himself, who will live forever to his glory. We are called to be part of this great work, which means that we must think about the events and people we encounter in a way that includes them (and us) in God’s story of redemption. The only hope for *our* story is that we would be part of *his* story of redemption. The only right way to approach the events of our lives is to approach them redemptively.

This mission and our call to be part of it is clearly laid out in God’s covenant call to Abram (*read Gen 12:1-3*) culminating in the words: “In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” God’s words to Abram are both a *comfort* and a *call*. What greater comfort can there be than to be chosen as the object of God’s blessing! But God never intended Abram to be just the object of his blessing. From Day One it was God’s intention that Abram would also be the *conduit* of his blessing to others. Through Abram all the nations on earth would be blessed. From the beginning, Abram was called to look beyond himself and to see his life redemptively. He was called to be part of what God was going to do not only *in* him and *for* him, but also *through* him. We must never think of ourselves as *objects* of his covenantal love without also thinking of ourselves as *conduits* of that love to others.

Redemption is not just for our benefit or for our good. It has always been according to God’s purpose and for his glory. We cannot treat salvation as a party where we are the honored

guests. It’s a celebration for the King to which we have been graciously (and amazingly) invited. What we celebrate is not just our invitation; we celebrate *him*, and we demonstrate our thanks by helping others come to know, serve, and celebrate him as well. It’s *his* party! *He’s* the guest of honor. All that we say and do should reflect a desire to be part of what he is doing, to bring him in some way the glory that is his due.

The Mission in Sharper Focus

Even as the Lord was giving his people the law in the Old Testament, he had this mission in view. The children of Israel were called to a radical commitment to God’s redemptive work, which would lead to a radical involvement in each other’s lives. They were called to speak in a way that promoted the work God was doing in the lives of others. Our part in the King’s mission today could not be clearer than it is in Leviticus 19, a passage Christ alluded to when he summarized the law in Matthew 22:

Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour. Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I am the LORD. Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD (*Lev 19:15-18*).

What does this passage say about our relationships? God is telling us that it is impossible for us to live as if sin doesn’t exist. Because we are sinners and live in relationships with other sinners, sin will always be an issue. It is the inescapable reality of human life. The question is whether we are dealing with sin God’s way (redemptively) or according to the desires and purposes of our own sinful hearts.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Perhaps the first, most fundamental thing to notice in this passage is that the command to handle the sins of others God’s way is directly connected to the command to love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbors as yourself means many things, but of one thing we can be sure: it means dealing with their sin in a disciplined and distinctly biblical way. It means recognizing that we have been called by God to be part of what he is doing in their lives. We *are not* free to handle difficulties in whatever way seems best to us. When we are wronged, the thing of highest importance is not that we feel satisfied or avenged, but that we respond according to God’s plan and for his glory.

As we recognize this calling, we do not give in to the many sins of heart and tongue that are detailed in this passage, even though they are such a temptation when we have been sinned against. Remember, we are dealing with the sins of others all the time. It’ll be this way until the Lord returns. Until then, loving your neighbor as yourself has this redemptive quality in it. It means that you deal with sin not simply as a *victim*, but as a *servant* of the One who redeems.

Let’s face it: it’s hard for us to love our neighbor as ourselves even when we *haven’t* been sinned against! We are all prone to be self-centered, to want our own way, and to live for our own satisfaction and comfort. It’s so easy to give in to irritation and impatience when in some way our will has been crossed. I’m not even referring to situations where we have encountered serious sin. No, we have trouble loving people who are only guilty of failing to please us!

Let me give you an example from my own life. One of the things I enjoy doing is going to bed at approximately the same time as Luella. She is my closest companion and my best friend, and I enjoy those final moments of warmth between us at the end of the day. One evening at about ten o’clock, I came up from our family room to head for bed, with the assumption that Luella would be heading in that direction as well. When I entered the kitchen, I couldn’t believe what I saw! There was Luella, with a bucket and a brush, kneeling on the kitchen floor, getting ready to scrub it. Immediately I was filled with irritation. I couldn’t believe she was doing this to me! Didn’t she know that this was our special time? Did the floor have to be done *now*? It looked to me as if she was more committed to a clean floor than she was to her own husband.

Fortunately, I didn’t say all the things I was thinking. But I did say, with an edge in my voice, “I can’t believe you’re doing this now!” as I went off to bed. I have thought about that scene many times since. What has hit me is not just my impatience, but the utter selfishness that lay behind it. As I looked at Luella, I did not see a loving and dedicated woman who also wanted to be in bed, but who had seen a job that needed to be done. I know what went through her mind. That floor drives her crazy! With six people in the house, it always seems dirty. Here was an opportunity to get it done, because it was later in the evening and the kitchen traffic was light. Because of her loving dedication to her family, she seized the opportunity without grumble or complaint.

But as I looked at Luella that night, that’s not what I saw. I saw a wife who was *supposed* to be heading to bed with me! There was no thanks to Luella or God in my heart. I went upstairs irritated that I had to go to bed alone because Luella had chosen the floor over me. Ridiculous? Embarrassing? Yes, but perhaps this is the power of this example. We struggle with the little events of life. We struggle to communicate in the midst of them in a godly way, even when we are *not* being sinned against. We lash out with angry, unkind words when the bathroom is occupied, or when someone is making us late, or when we don’t get the appreciation we think we deserve, or when someone butts in line in front of us, or stays too long on the phone...the list could go on and on!

This is where we live every day. If we respond selfishly to the normal give-and-take of relationships, how will we ever respond redemptively in the face of *real* sin? If we are not loving our neighbors in the normal course of things, how will we ever do it when the stakes are much higher? Again, we need to be gripped by the grandeur of our calling and the demands it makes on our daily talk. And we need to believe the truth that God has already given us everything we need, to do what he has called us to do! (*2 Peter 1:3-4*).

How Will We Deal with Sin?

Since we are all affected by one another's sin in some way, we are all dealing with sin daily. The issue Leviticus puts before us is this: Are we dealing with it God's way or ours? Make no mistake, there is a stark contrast between the two. Leviticus lays out for us the ways we can respond to the sin around us. In the center is the middle way of love, the road God has called us to travel in our relationships with one another. On either side are the valleys of hatred: on one side the passive forms of hatred and on the other the more active forms. We are commanded to stay on the middle road of love and not allow ourselves to fall off into either valley.

The valley of passive hatred includes inner attitudes of favoritism and partiality (*Lev 19:15*), carrying hatred in your heart (*v 17*), bearing a grudge (*v 18*), and harboring desires of vengeance (*v 18*). Clearly, none of these attitudes are consistent with God's call to love our neighbors as ourselves. Each reflects heart responses of self-love and anger against those who have not pleased us or satisfied our desires. Here our heart responses are shaped by our selfish expectations, not the glory of sharing in God's work on earth. There is no higher calling, yet it is one we easily forget in the press of life.

On the active side of hatred are things like treating people with favoritism and partiality (*v 15*), judging others unfairly (*v 15*), spreading slander (*v 16*), and seeking revenge (*v 18*). Again, these responses are the opposite of love. Dwelling on someone's sin, desiring to see someone hurt the way we've been hurt, keeping a record of wrongs, gossiping about someone's sin, acting out any form of revenge—these are all offenses against God's calling in our lives. Yet if we examine ourselves, we'll find many of these responses present (*see Matt 18:15-19*).

The wife who gives her husband the "silent treatment" when he's done something hurtful has responded vengefully and, in so doing, has forsaken her redemptive calling. The daughter who's been hurt by her parents and goes to her room, shuts the door, and recounts in graphic detail all the ways her family has failed her, has forsaken her calling. The Christian brother who shares a juicy piece of gossip in the guise of a prayer request has fallen off the middle road of love and forsaken his calling. The husband who goes to work angry that his family made him late, who fantasizes how much easier life would be without them has offended God's call.

The Middle Way of Love

The middle way of love is not about being nice or benignly tolerant of those we see doing wrong. Love is active! We are to be God's agents of rescue when we see another's sin. He calls us to judge our neighbor fairly and to rebuke each other in a way that is frank and clear. Having said this, please recognize that we are not told to be self-righteously judgmental, or to act like detectives, hunting for all the sin we can uncover in other people's lives. Nor are we called to be verbally abusive, coloring the confrontation with name-calling and other unkind characterizations. Rather, God is saying that when *he* purposefully chooses to expose another's sin to us, we are to respond with self-sacrificing, redemptive love. We

go to our neighbor and honestly and clearly confront him with his sin—not so that he would submit to our judgments, but so that he would submit to God's and seek his mercy and grace. We want God, his will, and his mercy to loom large in the conversation—not us.

Something else is radical about this passage. It says that if we fail to do this, if we love ourselves more than we love God and others, if we allow ourselves to fall into those valleys of hatred, we will share in the guilt of our neighbor's sin! Yes, Cain, we are our brother's keeper! (*Gen 4:9*). God's call could not be stronger. To fail to respond to another's sin with redemptive love is to share in his guilt. As God says through the prophet, if the watchman sees the enemy coming and fails to warn the people, their blood is on his hands (*Ezek 33:1-9*). To be part of God's redemptive rescue is not only a high calling but a moral obligation. The watchman's job is not to force people to respond to his warning; it is simply to give ample and timely warning. He is to make sure that his warning is understood and to entreat people to act upon it. Having done these things, his mission is complete. He has fulfilled his calling.

We are to warn others to seek the protective, rescuing care of the Redeemer. Frank and Ellen didn't miss their calling. They entered Ryan's room as watchmen, and their rebuke came as a loving warning that the Lord used to turn Ryan's heart. Everything they said flowed out of a heartfelt desire to be part of what God was doing. Don't miss the fact that before God used their talk to work in Ryan's heart, he *first* worked in their hearts. And so it will be with us.

Notice that this passage is punctuated twice with: "I am the LORD." God is saying, "This is the King speaking and this is my will for you. I am the LORD, and I am calling you to love one another this way. There is no room for debate or excuse or question. I am the LORD. Now go and be my instruments of warning and rescue to those I have placed near you."

The Great Commission as a Lifestyle

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you (*see Matt 28:16-20*).

This is one of the clearest calls to be part of the King's mission! This passage is not to be limited to "foreign missions," or we miss much of its meaning. The church has been weakened by its tendency to neglect the *second half* of this commission. We are called not only to make disciples, but also to teach them how to live obediently to every command of Christ. It's a call to exhort, encourage, and teach so that we would be progressively freed from old patterns of sin, and thus conformed to the image of Christ. The Great Commission is not only a call to bring people *into* the kingdom of light, but also a call to teach them to *live* as children of light. When we fail to see the second half of the commission—"teaching them"—we miss its claim on our everyday talk.

This commission is a call to a *lifestyle* of ministry. This keeps us from divorcing ministry from our everyday lives. Where do we teach and learn to live as obedient children of

God? Not just in the formal gatherings of the church, but in everyday life experiences, where we wrestle with the temptations of the enemy and the desires of the sinful nature. So the husband/wife and parent/child relationships become a forum for Great Commission ministry. This means that when I want to talk with my wife about difficulties and disappointments in our relationship, I do so with a "second-half of the Great Commission" mentality. I acknowledge that the most important goal of the conversation is that our words encourage the work that God is doing in both of us that we may live more fully as children of light. Again, the issue is not *whether* we deal with the problems, but *how*.

A "life is ministry" attitude must govern all the words we speak. We do not step out of life into ministry. God's call extends to every moment of life! Our response is to submit to the moral obligation to love our neighbors as ourselves, motivated by more than our own happiness, satisfaction, and comfort. We want to be part of what the King is doing in the lives of those around us. And these opportunities are not going to look like what we expect. The most powerful moments of ministry come in times of difficulty, large and small. Some of our most wonderful ministry opportunities will come in moments we would rather avoid.

Often in such moments we are so caught up in our own emotions and desires that we lose sight of the opportunity God is giving us to speak words that promote his redemptive mission. When Frank first read Ryan's e-mail, he didn't think, *What a wonderful opportunity for ministry! Thank you, Lord!* No, his heart was filled with a father's grief, which was appropriate. But those painful words, written in black and white in a way Ryan could not deny, were what God used to mobilize Frank and Ellen and to rescue Ryan. That moment of grief was not Frank and Ellen's moment, *it was God's!* He exposed them to things in Ryan's heart that he already knew were there. He called them to share in *the suffering* so that they would also share in *the glory* of his work of change!

Frank and Ellen needed to get beyond the talk that is driven by racing emotions and fearful desire. They had to speak to Ryan out of the redemptive love of God. That love was the reason for this opportunity. It enabled humble words of grace. They approached Ryan as sinners who had experienced the intervening hand of the Redeemer themselves, and who longed for their son to experience the same powerful, delivering grace. We speak God's words to each other not because we are higher or better, and not because we are capable of fixing people. No, we teach, encourage, admonish, correct, and exhort because God has commissioned us to do so. This call is not one sector of our already-too-busy lives; it is to be our lifestyle. Ministry will come unexpectedly, often wrapped in difficulty. In the midst of these opportunities, our talk is to be consistent with God's call, for we have accepted the fact that we have been chosen to be on the King's mission.■

—Adapted from the book **WAR OF WORDS**
by Paul David Tripp

On The King's Mission

As he recounted it, I knew it was a story I wouldn't soon forget. It had all the ingredients of an ugly confrontation between a parent and an older child. There was the son's two-faced rebellion, a purposeful deception using his father's equipment to pull it off—all the typical stuff that sends parents over the edge. But this time things were different. The ugly scene didn't take place. More good than one would think possible resulted from something that started out looking terrible. What made the difference? Let me tell the story.

It was the end of an unusually busy day at work. Frank couldn't wait to get home, have a hot meal, and relax for a couple of hours before contacting some clients by e-mail later in the evening. As he drove home he muttered to himself, "I'm bushed!" Walking in the door, the smells of a great meal greeted him. He had time to read the paper before supper and a brief moment to relax afterwards. He was refreshed as he sat down at the computer in his home office. But when he checked the incoming e-mail, he was greeted with something that would completely alter his evening.

There was an e-mail for his son. He didn't usually read Ryan's letters, but as he was printing it for him, Frank looked up and saw foul language in capital letters all over the computer screen. He stopped and read the letter. As he did, his heart sank. It was sexually disgusting, disrespectful, and hinted at events that, if true, made him wonder if he knew his own son. He immediately began searching the computer for e-mails from Ryan to this friend. It wasn't long before he found the most recent letter. To his dismay, his son's letter was worse. It was so bad that Frank literally wept over it. He sat at the computer, stunned. The sadness quickly turned to anger. Red-faced, with e-mail in hand, he went looking for Ryan.

It was an act of God's grace that his son wasn't home. God had something good in mind for both of them. Frank called his wife, Ellen, to come into their bedroom. He stuck the e-mail in her face and said, "Take a look what our sweet little boy has been up to!" Like Frank, Ellen wept as she read what her son had written. "Where is he? I want to talk to him now!" Frank demanded, only to be told that Ryan was out studying. He would not be home until quite late. "I can't believe it! The one time we have to talk to him and he's not here!" Frank stormed. "Maybe it's for the best, dear. It will give us time to think," Ellen replied. Truer words have never been spoken.

As they began to talk, their perspective began to change. In a conversation that consumed most of the evening, Frank began to see the issue not so much as a personal affront but as an opportunity to minister to his son, who was clearly in the throes of great temptation and sin. Ellen was able to move beyond the goal of de-escalating Frank's anger to step back and take a more thoughtful look at the situation. Together,