

Voices: Who's throwing the stones of judgment?

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Recently, I've heard a lot of people say true Christian love requires telling people when they are sinning, so I thought I would offer a product to make it a little easier.



Ellen Di Giosia Here's what I have in mind: A small card printed on one side with "Love you!" On the other side will be a list of personal sins with checkboxes. When I go out to dinner and see someone eating a third piece of fried chicken, I can simply check "gluttony" and drop it off at her table. I can leave a "greed"-checked card under the windshield wiper of the Porsche I often see parked outside my HEB. It might be best to have cards made with the "gossip" box pre-checked, as I will be handing many of them out at prayer meetings.

Drive-by judgment

Does that sound ridiculous? It's not too different from the drive-by judgment we often exercise. Many Christians seem all too happy to spout off about the personal sins of people we don't know. We rant and rave on Twitter, or we sneak into the comment sections of other people's Facebook pages to get our two cents in.

When it comes to the fraught issues surrounding human sexuality and gender, Christians have a terribly nasty habit of weighing in where we are uninvited. We insist following Jesus faithfully means calling people out on their sin wherever and whenever we see it, which we politely term speaking the truth in love. “Yes, Jesus ate with sinners,” some say, “but remember that Jesus also said, ‘Go and sin no more.’”



Since that is widely considered the mic drop of these conversations, it's helpful to examine it more closely. The gospels are full of stories of Jesus engaging with sinners. How does he speak about it?

What Jesus says/doesn't say

In the Gospel of Luke, a sinful woman appears at a dinner party at a Pharisee's house. Armed with an alabaster jar of ointment, she weeps at the feet of Jesus and anoints him with her tears. The outraged host is quickly put in his place, then Jesus turns to the woman and forgives her sins. Now here is where we might expect Jesus to tell the woman to do better in the future, but his surprising final words to her are not an admonition against sin. He dismisses the sinner like this: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

The famous sentence “Go and sin no more” is from John's story of an adulterous woman. Having been caught red-handed, she is brought out by the scribes and Pharisees to be killed. Jesus stoops to scribble mysteriously on the ground, fielding continued questions from the elders. Jesus informs them that their own sin disqualifies them from carrying out the legally mandated punishment.

The Gospel writer tells us this is a test. The authorities want nothing more than for this itinerant preacher to mess up so they can charge him with a crime. This is a moment of great danger for Jesus and his followers. So,

when Jesus tells the adulterous woman to refrain from sin, he only does so after he has put himself in harm's way to defend her. Jesus puts his own body on the line to speak out against those who would judge her. How many of us would do the same?

The sinners Jesus denounces

The only sinners Jesus denounces in public are religious people who oppress others. He turns over tables in the temple and chastises leaders for their hypocrisy. He lambasts the scribes and Pharisees who "lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them" (Matthew 23:13). He criticizes those in power for laying heavy burdens on the people.

We say we aspire to be more like Jesus. We want to put ourselves into the gospel story and ask, "What would Jesus do?" But we largely ignore the systemic sin that plagues our churches, our communities and our nation. Instead of speaking truth about racism, sexism or unjust economic systems, we "love" people from afar by proclaiming them sinners. How unlike the man we claim to follow.

This is not to say we never address personal sin. But if we are speaking truth in love, we must have demonstrated that love already. We must earn the right to speak to someone about sin. No "sinner" is required to listen to us; we build credibility in the process of a relationship. Moreover, being in a relationship assumes mutual accountability. It does not exist solely for the purpose of one person judging the other in the name of the gospel.

Otherwise, when we place ourselves in the story, we are not Jesus, and we are not the shamed sinner. We are the men with stones in our hands, waiting for an opening in the fray.

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