

## ***The Greater Offense***

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*Mirriam-Webster* defines an *offense* as: “An act of stumbling; a cause or occasion of sin; and/or something that outrages the moral or physical senses.” Most married couples seeking the support of a biblical counselor will report any number of such *offenses*. Their focus however is *horizontal* in its orientation. In other words, the husband and wife can readily report when, where, and how they have offended each other; but most fail to recognize the offense they have committed against God. Scripture tells us that this is the *greater offense* and that we must address ourselves *vertically* first, if we are to become the husband or wife we are directed to be.

Within the construct of the relational gospel, sin toward God has been largely replaced with the concept of error and failure between people. We are much more focused upon the *needs* of one another, than we are directed toward sanctification and holy conduct before God. As a result, our relational perspective is one of exchanging behaviors that fulfill our mates, instead of developing a connected and abiding relationship through Christ that builds and sustains godly character, integrity, and consistency under the marital covenant.

The Pharisees asked Jesus: “*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?*” (Matt. 22:36). He responded with a clear and precise order for life:

***“You shall love the LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37-39).***

The importance of this sequential order must not be overlooked, because without the “first and great commandment,” we have no hope of fulfilling the second. For the believer, this spiritual relationship is foundational to everything else in life, especially the Christian home. When we become preoccupied with meeting human needs over adjusting ourselves to the mandates and callings of God, we have placed the proverbial “cart ahead of the horse.”

Yet, couples often do not have this perspective. Instead of transformation, they are seeking relief. Instead of repentance, they are speaking self-justification. Instead of biblical obedience and endurance, they are requiring an immediate solution. The counselor’s first task is to help the couple make the shift from this selfish bias to one of accountability before God. Clearly, if one is not invested in pleasing their Heavenly Father, he/she is not likely to invest in pleasing a spouse. Paul wrote:

***“For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10).***

In counseling, the world's sorrow is evident. Sadness and regret over the perceived needs that have gone unmet, loneliness and grief associated with a distant and cold environment, anger and unforgiveness for past errors, together with guilt and shame, can consume a home and strangle its life. Attempts to address such matters without the redemptive quality of *godly sorrow*, will prove futile. But when godly sorrow comes, repentance and transformation is true and achievable.

When King David sinned with Bathsheba, he clearly was an offense to man. He had seduced and stolen another man's wife, he had placed the husband in great peril leading to his death, and he was an insult to the nation of Israel as a fallen leader. Yet, for all of the damage wrought, David did not alter his course until godly sorrow altered forever, his assessment of his sin. He prayed to God:

***Against You, You only, have I sinned,  
And done this evil in Your sight—(Psa. 51:4).***

Within the context of human relationships, it is easy to feel justified in our actions. We view marriage as a balance sheet that must have equal sums in each column. We give because we have received; we take because we feel we are at a deficit; and we return "evil for evil" (1 Thess. 5:15) out of righteous indignation.

But with the Lord, we can keep no such accounting. There is no balancing of our relationship with Him, because the debt is immeasurable. Instead, we are summoned again to the "first and great commandment" that should "compel" us toward a selfless existence. Paul wrote:

***For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again (2 Cor. 5:14-15).***

A selfless existence is not one of reciprocity and balance. It is a life submitted to the teachings and callings of Christ—no matter our circumstance. It is a life measured against Scripture and not assessed according to *felt needs*. It is a life in intimate harmony with our Savior that makes the second commandment, to love our neighbors, possible. In this position, our relationships are infused with the character and sacrifice of Christ (Phil. 2:5); the fruit of His Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23); and the attributes of His divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Sin produces suffering. It injures and destroys marriages and families. But the remedy is not found within our capacity to reconcile with each other, but rather through our reconciliation with Christ. Without His presence, we are helpless in solving problems and repairing the hurt that sin invariably brings.

By helping counselees to recognize the *greater offense*, hope is restored and the capacity for true reparation is regained. Humans will never be accountable to each other if they are not first accountable to God. It is the counselor's call to follow the biblical structure that brings redemption and restoration. We must be on guard and reject the temptation to psychologically address the *needs* of individuals ahead of the *righteousness* of God. Jesus was always clear about the order of life, which must come in harmony with the order of His Kingdom.

***“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matt. 6:33).***