

ON TURNING YOUR BACK

I have never known any person very well or for very long who did not eventually run into the hard problem of having to turn away from some things or from some people. We call it “prioritizing” today. That sounds less personal and painful, but it is not.

An old saint in Worcester, Massachusetts, used to say to me, “Remember, Bruce, elimination is as necessary to the health of the body as ingestion.” Transcendence, growth, change, conversion of every kind and degree always require a certain amount of reordering of our lives. New things come, but some things must go. If nothing goes, there is no room for the new.

As Christians, we are particularly troubled by this reality. It is right that we put most of the emphasis on reconciliation, acceptance, forgiveness, restoration. But it has come to the place where we almost never hear about the other side of the coin. And so I keep running into folk who are deeply troubled and who assume themselves to be wrong and unchristian when faced with the necessity of eliminating some things or some people from their lives. They say to me, “But I never heard in church that such things could ever be right.”

Come to think of it, I don’t know that I ever heard it either. And that is a very grave omission.

One of the clearest themes and thrusts of the Christian Faith is the whole area of reconciliation: opening closed relationships; forgiveness; reversing and redeeming, by the power of love, the evil and resentment and animosity that divide God’s children from God and from one another. The resulting loneliness and pain and destroyed peace of such resentment and animosity are the source behind most of the familiar mayhem on our planet. In short, one of the things we ought to expect – and probably one of the strongest motives that drew us to the Christian Life in the first place – is the possibility that we ourselves can become more loving, and the hope that we would meet other people who would share with us and deal with us according to the ways of reconciliation. It does happen, but we also discover that it is not all instantaneous or simple or automatic.

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Now, it is neither appropriate nor possible for us to deal much with those who have walked out on us. We believe in freedom – it’s their choice – and most of us cannot “afford” to do more than accept the rejection on as simple and practical a level as possible. Otherwise we get into vindictiveness and judgment and resentment that shrivel the soul. So we put the matter in God’s hands, accept it for the time being, and move on.

But there is another issue that troubles every person who takes the Christian Life to heart: Is it ever right for us, as Christians, to leave, to say goodbye, to disassociate ourselves from some person? And what if that person comes back and says to us, “Let’s be friends again”? Are we required to forgive and to take that person back into our space and time no matter what?

I presume the subject is clear to you – that you know what I am talking about, and that you are even able to relate to it personally. Most of us have lost people out of our lives (not by death or distance, but by some bitter stress or misunderstanding) and we regret it, and the empty place is still a wound within us that throbs afresh each time we touch it.

But our subject today is the other side of the coin. What about the people we want or need or think we need to get *out* of our lives? If we have done it, must we always feel guilty about it? If we have only thought about it, is it ever right to go ahead and do it? I am presuming that we have no interest in coming at this from a merely human or legal or pragmatic point of view. Seeing the issue from the Christian perspective – wanting our lives to be under the discipline and guidance of the Holy Spirit – is it ever permissible to turn your back on somebody?

I entered the Christian ministry convinced that love (as I understood it) was always the answer, and that turning away from a person on purpose was never the Christian choice. Well, one area of exception seemed to be the area of romance. Nobody could marry more than one person. So turning away in that category was sometimes unavoidable. But short of that, I believed that the Christian should always hang in when it came to caring about and relating to other people.

As if he knew that this was my conviction and belief, he was waiting for me on the very first day we moved into the parsonage of my very first church: a young man dressed in the full armor of needs

and problems. I, of course, knew it was because he had never been fully accepted, truly understood, completely cared about, really loved. Fifteen years later, three churches later, three thousand miles from where we met, I finally said to him, “Get out of my house. I don’t want to see you anymore. I don’t want you in my life.” That was the first time in my life I ever did such a thing. It was no accident or whim, but it seemed a very strange thing to do, all the same.

That was just over ten years ago. I must say, not having him in my life has been a big improvement. I heard not long ago that he was still alive and doing quite well. Both things were hard to believe. I was surprised at how good that news made me feel (though it did not make me feel good enough to invite him back into my life). I was finally convinced that it had been necessary and “right” for me to turn my back on that person. I was not doing him any good. And I felt he was doing me, my family, and the churches I served a lot of harm, and harming himself in the process.

Psychologically speaking, it still opens “Pandora’s box” does it not? If in some circumstances it is right for me to turn my back on another, then there must be some circumstances in which it would be right for others to turn their backs on me. And if that’s the case, perhaps one day it might even be right and necessary for *God* to turn away from me. That is the spectre which is raised. That is what makes the subject so important and interesting and emotional. Somehow, in this category more than most, we recognize that in some fascinating way, the little acts and scenes of our daily lives are reflections of vast and mighty cosmic issues.

So we keep reading the Scriptures, and we keep watching what Jesus was actually like. Surprisingly, Jesus gives instructions on the very subject. (Matthew 18:15-17) He outlines procedures for people having trouble with each other. It ends with the person being rejected! That is, the instructions continue to the point where turning your back is the appropriate choice. I do not remember being told about that in Sunday School, church, youth group, or even seminary. Somehow I was always left with the impression that it could/should never come to that.

Of course, a Christian is supposed to read the Scriptures for herself. I finally learned that. I keep trying to teach you too. It is not about niceness – it is about truth. It turns out that Jesus was adamant about going His own direction, living for the Kingdom.

Nobody could put emotional, national, spiritual, or physical ties on Him strong enough to divert Him from His course. He taught His followers to live much the same way. We ourselves can be compromised; not such a big deal. But the Kingdom is too great for us to knowingly compromise it. Sometimes we must turn away from things or people who want to require us to do that.

The pressures of scribes, Pharisees, even the Sanhedrin – and Jesus' turning His back on them – should be obvious. Why is it not? Challenger after challenger comes to debate with Him. Sometimes we get interesting conversations. Sometimes Jesus simply shuts them off and walks on by. With some, like the rich young ruler, it is hard to know who turns his back first. It is clear that Jesus feels no compulsion to have the conversation work out “nicely” or to have everybody leave feeling friendly. The man at the Pool of Bethesda is another incredible example. (John 5:2-17)

It is not Satan but Jesus who says, *“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you.”* (Matthew 7:6) Instructions about shaking the dust from our feet and about letting our peace return to us are explicit. (Luke 9:5) *“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.”* (Luke 11:23) There are times to turn our back on people. It is not a matter of being unchristian – unless we continue to act friendly and attempt reconciliation when we are not supposed to. It is not something to feel guilty about – unless we fail to turn away when we should.

Yes, in the same passage Jesus teaches that we must forgive seventy times seven. But that kind of forgiveness assumes and depends upon the person having repented, and we have lots of people talking about forgiveness today who do not seem to know that repentance is an essential part of it.

Christian love is not physically injurious to any person for any reason. That does *not* mean it is soft! I remind you that the only reason Jesus made any impact on the world with His kindness and compassion and love was because He was not soft! His kindness and compassion and love were not because He was afraid, or because He wanted something for Himself, or because He could not stand strife or was trying to avoid unpleasant scenes. He was kind and compassionate and loving because He chose to be. He forgave because He had forgiveness to give and chose to give it. That is what made the impact. He did not have to – He *chose* to.

The church today is frequently too soft for that kind of love. It forgives because it is afraid not to, rather than because, in love, it chooses to. And so when the forgiveness is granted, we cannot tell whether the person has been appeased, tolerated, redeemed, or merely ignored. Half the time, even the forgiven person does not know if he or she has repented. Softly, quietly, we drift off into the dusk, where even love is so soft that we cannot tell if we are being loved or just tolerated, or maybe we just go unnoticed.

So consider the following:

1.) Christianity has always been in conflict (battle) with those who reject its basic message. A Kingdom based on love is still in opposition to and at odds with every kingdom based on any other premise. Of course, a Kingdom of love must stay with love's methods, or lose the war. The only other thing we can be sure of is that Jesus' definition of love is not what most people mean by that word today.

2.) The application of love's principles must be appropriate to the person being loved. Trying to find one precept or one rule for all people or all situations will always result in a soft, counterfeit (uncaring) love. Many of the teachings of the New Testament apply specifically to relationships between *people inside the fellowship of the church*. There is a different code for *those outside the church*, and still another code for *those who are known enemies*. We might expect that every Christian would be very interested in, instructed in, and aware of these three different, appropriate approaches.

3.) Every Christian is required to forgive. But there are two basic categories of forgiveness, if you are on the forgiving end:

a.) If the person you need to forgive is unrepentant, getting the poison out of your own soul is all that is required. Nothing happens to the relationship, and reconciliation is not expected.

b.) If the person is repentant, forgiveness is mandatory and means the complete restoring of the relationship, with no holding back on your part.

It remains clear, however, that there are times when Christians will be required to turn their backs on specific relationships, which means turning your back on a specific person. Be careful! It is never right to turn your back on a person simply because of an error, a blunder, a mistake, a failure, an inadequacy on their part – no matter how much injury this may have inflicted, from your point of view.

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Closing out a relationship does not mean we are angry, vindictive, jealous, or resentful. In fact, if these emotions are still the dominant factor, we probably still belong in the relationship, with much unfinished business to attend to. God puts up with *our* sin and errors all the time, and expects us to be willing to put up with the growth pains of our brothers and sisters too.

However, some relationships are themselves off track, and they keep heading in the wrong direction. Often we try to decide who the good guy is and who the bad guy is, but that is not always relevant. Sometimes one person is clearly the opposition, but sometimes two people simply stymie each other. Every time they get together, forward motion stops, strange issues come to the fore, and progress for both of them is blocked. Likewise, there are certain *situations* that close us down. Some people can work at great heights with no bad reactions, for instance, while others cannot. Some people can work well in mental institutions, while others quickly feel unnerved or depressed.

It is clear that there are certain situations, certain issues, and, on occasion (at least for a while), certain people we do not belong with, should not stay around, and should not keep trying to resolve things with. It is not merely that we are then permitted to turn our backs – we are *required* by the Holy Spirit to leave, to turn away, to get out. Specifically, when anyone or anything consistently and persistently interferes with our knowing and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are required to break it off, to leave. The Christian Pilgrimage is always top priority.

Christians need to be aware that such dilemmas will come. Again and again I have watched sincere Christians struggling with situations they should be turning their backs on. But they will not or cannot do it, sometimes for years, because they have it in mind that the Christian Faith (God) does not permit it. I have preached this sermon to remind you, via Jesus' own teachings and example, that sometimes the Christian Faith (God) not only permits it, but requires it.

Now, a couple of comments to make sure you know you heard me right. The toughest category, in my opinion, is the children. On rare occasion, children get into a negative relationship with their parents wherein the child continually fails and/or gets into trouble as a way to punish or control the parents. It is a terrible pattern from which there is no relief for parents or child until the parents finally awaken and turn away completely, at least for a while.

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That is the most difficult of all, but a close second is when we are required to turn away from a spouse, close friends, or relatives. Beyond that, there may be a painful parting required from a job or an organization. If we hang in and hang on in situations where we are required to turn away, the eventual result is idolatry. God is displaced from first place in our lives, and these other values (real or imagined) move into first place.

In any case, Jesus, Scripture, and the Christian Faith do not always instruct us to keep, maintain, restore, or reconcile every relationship. Sometimes – and they are never fun times – we are required to let go, to turn our backs, to make no move to reconcile. Jesus refused to restore or heal the relationship between Himself and Herod or Pilate or the priests or most of the Pharisees. He even broke the ties between Himself and many of His own former disciples. Love does not require us to forsake or betray the Author of Love himself! Jesus seems to have been one of the few human beings who ever figured that out. Perhaps that is why He was able to go on believing in love's power so totally, and in the very places where we are most tempted to quit on it.

Fortunately, it never has to be left looking grim. After we shake the dust, excommunicate a brother or sister, or turn our backs, there is still the surprising power of the Gospel, which is beyond our control. And that means HOPE. Be ready for reunion – always. Sometimes it comes best when we stop trying to control it. Who knows on what day a Saul will walk a Damascus Road? And wherever real repentance strikes, it is always a whole new ball game. The only way we can be ready for any of it – the detachment *or* the reunion – is to stay very close to Jesus Christ, very constant in our prayers. And we need to remember that the love of Jesus Christ is not soft. It is not soft for you or me or anybody else. That may be partly why you can bet your life on it.