

A Climate of Safety—by former Pastor Larry Hoskins

If you were struggling with a particular sin, would you feel free to admit it, or would you be inclined to pretend that everything was okay? Your answer to that question may have to do with how you perceive yourself. It may depend on how well we as a church live out our faith — whether we create a climate of fear or a climate of safety.

A Proper Perception of Perfection

Sometimes, in the church, there is an interesting combination of spiritual truths. On the one hand, we are told to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and to make no provision for the flesh in regards to its desires (Romans 13:14). On the other, we are told to confess our sins one to another (James 5:16). To do the latter requires that we have failed in the former, and who likes to admit failure? The “easier” position is simply to teach and expect what is right and never admit that one has done wrong. Such a position is often compounded by our own tendency to be prideful, to maintain “image,” and to self-righteously judge those who battle sins with which we have no problem. Like the “Whack-a-Mole Gopher Bash,” it doesn’t take too many times of sticking one’s head up and having it whacked, if we admit our sin, before we learn to stay in the hole, remaining safely invisible, pretending to be perfect. Before long, the people who comprise the church become a bunch of pretenders who have it all together, but worse, it creates a climate of fear — fear of judgment, fear of exposure, fear of not measuring up — that inhibits the very love that is to mark us as Jesus’ disciples to begin with. Love never requires people to pretend. Love takes people where they are, coming along side them in committed community, while, at the same time, calling them to deepen their walk with the Lord, to shed the “old man,” and to put on the newness of life we are to have in Christ.

But what about the sins with which we do have a problem? Confession of sin requires self-awareness of what sin is and of our failure to conform to God’s righteous standard. It further requires a godly humility and a certain level of willing transparency. It also requires a safe set of people who understand that godly living is the standard, that sin is not okay, and that we have to lovingly allow each other to fail in the process of pursuing becoming like Christ, while at the same time, not giving ourselves or our fellow believers permission to become comfortable sinning. It’s not necessary that we “air our dirty laundry” before everyone, but we all need those in our lives who are committed to holding us accountable and to whom we are willing to submit ourselves out of reverence to God. As the Apostle Paul wrote,

"Not that I already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:12-14).

The Proper Theology of Judging

Our culture is in many ways counter to creating the safe environment where mutual confession and the pursuit of holiness in loving community can be pursued. The mantra of today is pluralism, diversity, and tolerance — except for any who neglect to conform to those perceived virtues. The philosophy of “Live and Let Live” is so in vogue that any judging of others is condemned. Some will even quote the Scripture, “Judge not, lest ye be judged” (Matt 7:1), in support of this viewpoint. However, a careful study of the context reveals that “not judging” is not the point at all. The emphasis is that we are liable to be held by others to the same standard that we place upon them, so that a proper self-examination must precede an appropriate judgment of others:

"You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Matt 7:5)

In fact, to fail to judge both ourselves and others in this way would be contrary to Scripture. We are called to restore others caught in trespass after looking at ourselves (Gal. 6:1), to seek to “win” a brother who has sinned by following a process of disciplined restoration (Matt. 18:15-17), and to turn back a brother who has strayed from the truth, from the error of his ways (James 5:19-20). In fact, we are cautioned against judging the unbelieving community, yet chastised for the arrogance of tolerating sin among the believing community (1 Cor. 5:1-13). All of these require a certain

willingness to lovingly judge other believers and to be lovingly judged by that same community as they seek to restore us when we have veered off course.

A Proper Climate for Progress

When Jesus said that our loving one another as He had loved us would be the identifying characteristic of His disciples (John 13:34-35), He was not defining love as is often understood by our culture. For many today, love means the late John Lennon's words, "let it be." This type of love would never confront another. It would never tell someone they are wrong. It would never hold them to a higher standard. In fact, it would be perceived by those with such an understanding of love to be unloving to break those very standards.

In the Scriptures, however, such a "love" would be anything but loving. Love of the brethren, as defined in 1 Corinthians 13:1-4 includes not rejoicing in unrighteousness, but rejoicing with the truth — not just a body of doctrine, but a doctrine revealed from God that comes with the accompanying expectation that it be lived out (c.f., John 17:17). This kind of love patiently calls people to the Lord and to His standards. It is kind. It does not act unbecomingly. It does not seek its own. It is not provoked. It does not take into account a wrong suffered. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and never fails. In other words, it calls fellow believers to holiness, but it doesn't walk away when a believer is caught in sin. It says, "I'm not going anywhere. I'm here with you. I'll help you, and I need you to help me, too!" The only exception is when a believer willfully refuses to repent and to separate sin from their lives even when so confronted. Then, for the protection of the Body, just as we amputate a gangrenous infection, we separate ourselves from the persistently sinful believer, even then with the hope that he or she will repentantly come back to the Lord and to the church family (1 Cor. 5:11-13; Matt. 18:17; 2 Thess. 3:6,14, 15). The thought in so doing, if we are loving each other properly, is that the pain of such separation would bring the errant brother or sister back (2 Cor. 2:5-8).

In order to reach this goal, there must be such a climate of love in the church that the issue is not fear of punishment and rejection, but a fear of disappointing the Lord and each other as we progress in our pursuit of holiness. The Apostle John wrote of such an environment in this way in 1 John:

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. (1 John 4:15-18 NASB95)

Let us not fall prey to the temptation of pretending to be perfect or to the self-righteousness which condemns others for their struggles with sin. Rather, let us come alongside each other, confessing our sins, with a Christ-like love, creating a climate of safety as we walk together in the process of growing into the perfection to which we are called in Christ Jesus.