

# The Counseling Zone

By Pastor Blake Shaw



This month we offer you a book review, by Pastor Blake Shaw, featuring the book, *Resisting Gossip: Winning the War of the Wagging Tongue*, by Matthew C. Mitchell

"Pssst! Did you hear about...?"; "Wow, I can't believe she..."; "You know, sometimes he just makes me so angry..."; "I think we need to pray for them. Did you know that they..." Gossip! Ah, that one sin that perhaps every person on the planet has struggled with at one time or another. Perhaps there is no other sin more overlooked, justified, and excused by Christians than the sin of gossip. I've seen people devastated by gossip, and have had friends watch their church crumble because of gossip. Not only that, I have gossiped and I have been the object of gossip. I'm guessing you have too. As a biblical counselor, I work hard at listening, and as I listen to the person seeking counsel, I often wonder if I am being party to gossip, given that many times in a counseling session, things are stated about others who are not present in the room with us. Because of the reality of what I have just stated, my interest was piqued when I saw an advertisement a few months ago for the book, *Resisting Gossip: Winning the War of the Wagging Tongue*, by Matthew C. Mitchell. I confess that at the time I saw the advertisement that the title wasn't what caught my interest, it was the fact that my friend Edward T. Welch had written the forward. So I thought, "Yeah, I should read that book." I'm so glad that I did. The author did a masterful job of addressing this issue. Mitchell wrote, not as a judge pointing the finger at all of the miserable gossips on the planet, but rather, as a fellow sinner, who understands the struggle with gossip. He related his own struggle, but not in an overly self-deprecating way where it leaves one wondering if he is for real. I saw his openness and honesty simply as a way that he, as the author, could invite others to walk with him as he looks into the issue of gossip.

Mitchell's book has many strong points, of which I will mention a few. For one, he begins by giving the reader a definition of gossip. Scattered throughout the beginning pages of the book, we see humility as he lets the reader know that he sees himself equally susceptible to the sin.

Second, Mitchell's book is sourced in God's Word. His frequent use of Scripture lets the reader know that gossip isn't just some hobby-horse that he wants to pick on, but, in fact, it is a sin issue that God addresses many times in His Word.

Third, Mitchell provides a set of questions at the end of each chapter that would seem appropriate for small group discussions; this is a great feature.

Fourth, the author identifies the real source of

gossip. He helps us understand that "All talk is heart talk," so when there is gossip, there is a problem in the heart. To help us understand more in-depth the issue of gossip, Mitchell has a section on the five different kinds of gossiping people. The practical evaluation of how people are involved in gossip came out in this section. It is my guess that most people would see themselves in one or more category. With each kind of gossip, Mitchell provides insight into what the particular person is looking for. For example, the author has one kind being "The Spy." The spy likes the power he feels when he garners knowledge. Another "kind" is the "Busybody" who has a problem with boredom. This breakdown was very insightful.

Fifth, the author talks about believing the best, making judgments, and applying the Golden Rule of thumb. This section of the book was practical and very good.

Sixth, the author turns his attention to the alternatives to gossiping. It would be most unfortunate to write a book, talking about how bad a particular action is but then to fail to offer the biblical solution. Mitchell does an excellent job of presenting some very practical advice on what God would want us to do instead.

Seventh, the author talks about how to respond when one is the object of gossip. Ah, this was such a critical section because more than likely, most people, if not all, will experience this at some point in life. So the practical elements of this chapter should prove to be very helpful to the reader.

Last, Mitchell offers some thoughts to the leaders of churches, doing so in a very pastoral way. That section alone is one that I believe every church leader should read.

I have no major criticisms of this book. The only one element that stirred up a concern for me was a section where a person was quoted as saying that he/she hated himself/herself. I don't believe that anyone hates himself/herself (because the Bible says so). This was a very minor part of the book and the author himself was not necessarily embracing that concept, so I would not see it as a major criticism to what is otherwise a fantastic book.

Those who know me well, know that I love practical theology. I received my undergraduate training/education in theology at the same school as the author, and I think it is safe to say that we learned systematic theology quite well. But what was lacking from that great education was Practical Theology. *Resisting Gossip* is really a practical theology and it is a book that I would encourage every believer in Christ to take the time to read.

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR:** The Community of Grace Biblical Counseling Ministry and the editor of the monthly newsletter welcome letters from the readers. Letters may be edited if the editorial team deems it necessary to do so to fit the space allowed or due to unbiblical communication practices. We encourage the reader to write with edification in mind. Letters must be signed. Names can be withheld upon request. If you have a question about counseling that you would like to ask for future publications feel free to submit those questions to Pastor Blake Shaw.



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## FOOD FOR THOUGHT BY PASTOR BLAKE SHAW



### *Dealing with Bitterness (Part 5)*

What one issue nags at the human soul, perhaps as much, if not more, than any other issue? I'm overwhelmingly convinced that one issue that would be a top-candidate in that regard is the issue of bitterness. As I've stated in previous articles, I am more and more convinced that one of the most pressing issues of our time is the battle with bitterness. I say that because time and time again I sit across the desk from individuals who are so drenched in bitterness that it oozes from their being. Oftentimes, in fact, it is in the person's facial expression and in their speech; bitterness has become their identity. Let me say with as much intensity as I can through the written word: "Bitterness will destroy you!" My friends, bitterness is a deadly serious issue that we must deal with and we must deal with it quickly and aggressively or it will destroy us. Over the past several years I have taken note of what bitterness does in a person's life. Here's what it will do to you: It will choke you spiritually. It will turn your eyes inward so that you become self-absorbed leading to more and more misery; It will rob you of joy; It puts God on the witness stand, so to speak, and demands that He answer questions from you; It will blind you and lead you on the path of self-righteousness where you become hyper-critical and hypocritical; It will destroy relationship after relationship; and it, like yeast, will begin to infect those with whom you associate; Worst of all, it robs God of the glory He deserves from your life.

In the previous articles I highlighted a verse from the book of Hebrews which says, "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord; looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled..." (Hebrews 12:14-15).

We have been challenged to not pass over the words of this verse too quickly. We need to look carefully at our lives and see if perhaps there is a root of bitterness that is springing up causing trouble and defiling many people. So, what do we do with bitterness? How do we deal with it? As I mentioned in a previous edition, bitterness towards someone is like drinking poison and then waiting for the other person to die. It really is madness, huh? And what a horrible way to live life!

As I have done in the past, let me preface the remainder of this article by saying 1) I realize that life in this sin-cursed, fallen world is hard, and for some, the situations you have gone through in life can be extremely difficult. In this article, as in others, I never

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want to convey an attitude that denies the tragic effects of life's hardships. Nor do I want to have a cavalier attitude about the sufferings of other people; 2) I write as a fellow-sinner, desperate for the grace of God in my own life. I too have seen elements of bitterness coursing through my veins at various junctures in my life. I have needed to repent of this sin. I say this because I want you to understand that I write, not as a distant observer who stands as a judge, but as a sinner who is just as susceptible to bitterness just as much the next person.

As we have seen in the previous articles on this issue, dealing with bitterness begins with admitting that we have a problem. Secondly, we need to remember that God, as a loving, superintending Father, is at work to make us more like Christ (Romans 8:29) through the very struggles that tempt us to exit into bitterness. God is making us holy, which, based upon the verse in Hebrews, noted above, "...without holiness no one will see God"; Thirdly we saw that we must run to the foot of the cross of Christ, for it is there that we are sobered when we realize that the only innocent person to ever live actually suffered horrendously. And such suffering was in our place. If anyone had justification for bitterness it was Christ Himself. Understand, if you don't place yourself at the foot of the cross of Christ, you will never make any headway in the battle against bitterness. As I wrote previously, "Run to the cross. Stand at the foot of the cross, and consider He who was bruised for our iniquities, who took our chastisement, whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed for us. Stare long and hard at the cross of Christ. Be cross-eyed, if you will, for it is hard to dwell in the sewage of bitterness when you ponder the innocent crucified Savior."

Last time we began to discuss a series of questions that I believe we need to answer as we consider how to deal with bitterness. In that edition of the COG we considered two questions. Let me restate those two questions and then move on to some other questions to consider.

**Question #1:** When reflecting back at your past when you were wronged by another/others, ask yourself, "Do I have perfect memory?" Hopefully your answer to that question is, "No." We saw last time that no one has infallible memory so our memory of an event, even one that was incredibly hurtful, could be skewed. Thus, when we begin to deal with an issue in our past, we do so tentatively because we may not remember all of the details.

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# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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**Question #2:** A second question to ask yourself, and one that is much harder to answer, is: "Was I truly innocent in that situation?" Don't read into the question. It isn't designed to imply that every time a person has been sinned against they have done something to cause someone to sin against them. We know that people are sinned against by others without any provocation. Likewise, we know that sinful people do horrendous things to others. We know that verbal, sexual, and physical abuse done to children is an example of sin that is mostly often unprovoked. But we also know that because of our own sinfulness, there are times where we were not innocent in the matter.

Here are some other questions to answer as we consider how to deal with bitterness:

**Questions #3:** "Did I Respond Properly?" For the sake of consideration, let's assume that you were wronged by someone and the sin against you was not provoked by anything you did. At this point, the world would say that you are a "victim." I'm not so concerned about that label but I would be concerned about what you do with it. You see, there is no hope or benefit in taking on the "victim" label, so I wouldn't advise wearing it. There are those who grab onto that label and it becomes their identity. But does it really help the person? No, it might garner some attention from others and get sympathy from others, but it does not truly help the person who was sinned against? Instead of wearing a label, you should take note that you were sinned against. As you wrestle with this idea, you should ask yourself if you responded rightly to that sin which was committed against you. This is a challenge for most of us. I know of no one who hasn't been sinned against. Those who are honest will confess that their response was, most often, anything but godly. This is where it can get really complicated, huh? We look at the situation and we now have several factors to deal with. First we have the offense against us. Then we have our own sinful response. It is at this point where we need to stop and confess to the Lord that our response was sinful and we seek His forgiveness (1 John 1:9). This is critical because until I get right with Christ, I can't see clearly enough to have a right view of the sin done against me. Our own sin becomes like blinders that either distort our view of reality or totally blind us. I need that perspective-distorting issue removed from my view so that I can then move forward to handle the sin done against me in a biblical fashion. Isn't it normal that when we are sinned against, we usually see the other person and their conduct but won't first look at ourselves? Jesus very pointedly spoke to this issue in Matthew 7:1-5 when He told His listeners to remove the log from his own eye first before he can remove the speck from his brother's eye. That is what we are trying to deal with when we ask this question.

**Questions #4:** "Should I confront the person who sinned against me?" This is not always the easiest question to answer but let me spell out some subsequent questions you can ask to determine whether or not you should confront this person:

1) Is the person still alive? Believe it or not there are some under the broad umbrella of Christianity who have what is akin to a séance, whereby, they visualize the dead relative/friend and they actually confront the person about the sin. This is a lot like practicing sorcery/witchcraft and has no place in a believer's life. So if the person is no longer alive, obviously, there is nothing more you can do in relation to him/her, thus, confrontation of the individual is out of the question.

2) Is the person still a part of my life now? This is to help one avoid running all over the globe trying to find this person to confront him/her.

3) Is this person a believer? You can't expect an unbeliever to respond like a believer should respond, so you have to think this through before initiating confrontation.

4) Should love cover this? 1 Peter 4:8, Proverbs 10:12, and Proverbs 17:9 speak to this issue of covering a transgression. The basic idea is that the true believer should overlook sins against him if possible and always be ready to forgive any insult or act of unkindness. So you will have to think this over and ask if perhaps this is one of those sins that love should cover.

5) Will confronting this person benefit you or will it benefit the other person spiritually? Ephesians 4:29 makes it clear that the words that come out of our mouths should build up. The world says, "Confront so you can get the shame off of you and put it on the other person." But God offers a different motivation and that is to confront the person so that restoration and reconciliation and edification can take place.

6) Is my memory correct? Such a question will help us to go tentatively into the confrontation because we know that we might not remember all of the details.

7) Does this person have a reputation of being a scoffer or a fool? Proverbs 13:1 tells us that the scoffer does not listen to a rebuke. And Proverbs 9:7-8 warns us to not rebuke or correct a scoffer.

Perhaps there is one lingering question you may have concerning whether you should confront this person and that is, "After answering each of those questions, what if I am still not sure?" My counsel would be to wait and get counsel? Romans 14:23 tells us that whatever is not done in faith it is sin, so if you aren't going "in faith" to confront then perhaps you might want to wait. At the same time, you might want to ask, "Am I hesitant to confront because I have a fear of man problem?" Christ would beckon you to act in love for the person, to fear God and God alone, and to go and confront him/her.

But let's say you have now come to the conclusion that you should confront him/her, the next question for you is, "Have you confronted him/her?" If you have already done so and they did not hear you, then perhaps it would be appropriate to take another believer with you, following the directives of Matthew 18:15-21. Perhaps it would be necessary for you to take another believer and the two of you seek a way to restore the person to God and to man. But if your answer to the question, "Have you confronted him/her?" is "No," you might want to stop and think through the various reasons for why you have not done that.

As you can tell, dealing with bitterness is not an easy endeavor. Perhaps that is why it is so critical to deal with sin quickly so that anger doesn't have time to fester and become a pollutant in the heart. Yet also, dealing with bitterness requires the grace of God. I desperately need to be soaked in God's grace before I can begin to respond to the heartache and sins experienced in living life in this sin-cursed fallen world filled with fallen humans. And it is only through the power of Christ in me that I have any chance of dealing with bitterness is such a way so as to experience true freedom. The same is true for you.



## Q&A with Pastor Blake Shaw

**Question:** Thank you for your Q&A related to abuse. Coming off of that, would you explain in brief what a biblical counselor would say about passages like 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 and the various views related to the grounds for divorce and also if or when separation is an option?"

### Answer:

These questions are frequently brought up in discussions related to abuse. As we answer this question we want to keep in mind at least two issues: 1) God's Word is the final authority on all issues of life; and 2) As believers, our home is not here, but we were created and saved for another world. When we address this question, if we compromise on either of those issues we will end up in the ditch. First, in this issue of the COG, let's deal with the 1 Corinthians passage since it is sometimes used to justify divorce in cases of abuse. As we approach this issue, my prayer is that the reader will know that as leaders we understand that situations involving abuse are incredibly difficult and, for the abused, very hard to live through. We, in no way, want our answers to these kinds of questions to come across as uncaring, disengaged, and critical of the person who is being abused. We take our shepherding seriously, just as we take the Word of God seriously, realizing the sobering reality that we give an account to the Chief Shepherd for how we shepherd His people. For this question I've asked Pastor Bryan to share some of his thoughts on 1 Corinthians 7:10-11:

The NAS version of 1 Corinthians 7:10 says, "But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (v. 11) but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband, and that the husband should not send his wife away."

In these two verses it's obvious that Paul is speaking to two Christians because in verses 12-16 he addresses mixed marriages – marriages in which only one partner is a Christian. So, verses 10-11 are directed toward husbands and wives in Christian marriages. What does Paul say here? He says the same thing Jesus said in Matthew 19: "Stay married." That's exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 19 and that's why Paul phrases his statement the way he does in verse 10: "But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord..." In other words, "I'm not saying anything new. This is exactly what the Lord taught when He was on the earth. Stay committed to your marriage." And verse 10 says this is the Lord's command. It's not just a suggestion or good advice or a counselor's opinion. This is the Lord's command.

Even though it's the Lord's command, there will still be those who disobey God and that's why Paul adds the phrase at the beginning of verse 11: "But if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband..." Paul is saying, "If you're going to disobey God by divorcing your spouse, at least stop there with that sin." It's amazing how you can tell people what God says but they go and do what they

want anyway. Paul realized this, so he sets up another blockade. He is not saying it's okay for you to leave your spouse. He is just being realistic and saying if you're going to be disobedient by divorcing, then stop there.

Let me illustrate this with a different scenario. Let's say a dad and a mom have a concern about their college-age son or daughter because of some of the decisions they are seeing in the young person's life. Specifically, the parents are concerned that their son or daughter is making decisions that can easily lead to immorality. And the parents have tried to encourage this young person and warn him or her but it is obvious that there is no reception. So, finally, these loving parents sit down with their son or daughter and say what they have to say with firmness: "Son (or daughter), don't become promiscuous. Don't get involved in sexual immorality. But if you do and a pregnancy occurs, don't make the baby pay the price by abortion." Because the parents say, "But if you do," does that kind of wording condone promiscuity or immorality? Obviously not. But the parents might choose to word their statement that way because they are concerned that there is a high degree of probability that their initial instructions will not be heeded.

That is exactly why Paul words his statement this way in verse 11. He is not saying, "Don't divorce your spouse but if you do, it's okay as long as you stay unmarried." That would be like saying, "Don't be sexually immoral but if you do become sexually immoral, it's okay as long as you don't abort the baby." That's obviously ridiculous. The command from the Lord and from Paul is, "Don't leave your spouse but if you sin by doing that, and you shouldn't, then you only have 2 alternatives: #1 - You remain single for the rest of your life or #2 - You become reconciled to your spouse. Those are the only two options you have because Jesus said if you divorce your spouse on grounds other than immorality and then you marry someone else, you are an adulterer and so is the person you marry. And Hebrews 13:4 says God will judge adulterers. That's exactly what Jesus taught in Matthew 19 and Paul simply re-affirms that here in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

In his commentary on 1st Corinthians 7, Dr. John MacArthur says this about a situation where someone leaves his/her spouse without biblical grounds: "...neither partner is free to marry another. They must stay single or rejoin their former mate. In God's eyes that union has never been broken. These are not a counselor's suggestions, but the Lord's commands."

*Next month we'll take on the sticky issue of separation..*