

Do I forbear or confront when someone offends me?

by Leslie Vernich

Question

I never know when I'm supposed to speak up or when I should just forbear and forgive someone. Can you give me some guidelines that would help me discern when each one would be appropriate?

Answer

Sometimes it can be confusing and it takes wisdom to discern. Jesus said that we're to be known by our extravagant love for one another. Even more challenging is Jesus' command to love our enemies and to forgive those who mistreat and hurt us.

But how do we balance these commands of Christ with the biblical mandates to speak the truth in love, to be the salt and light of the world, to confront sin, and to admonish the unruly? It isn't always clear when we should simply put up with one another's weaknesses and be patient with him or her, or whether we should confront a person directly.

Here are some guidelines that I use to decide when to forbear and when to confront.

First, forbearance is a very good discipline to practice. Jesus reminds us to take the log out of our own eye before we try to remove the speck in our brother's eye. We all need to learn to live graciously with one another's weaknesses and faults.

But forbearance isn't simply being passive, or quiet when someone does something wrong or hurts us. Forbearance actively works to understand, accept, forgive and let go of an offense, without ever talking directly to the person about it.

I'm afraid that instead of practicing biblical forbearance, we often choose outer silence but nurse inner discontent, anger or bitterness. By keeping quiet, we may preserve an illusion of peace, but it's not a biblical peace and often results in further conflict and alienation.

Second, confrontation isn't merely blurting out your thoughts and feelings at their moment of greatest intensity without any regard for the well being of the other person or the relationship. I liken that practice to vomit. Vomit feels better getting it out, but it belongs in the toilet and not on a person.

Below are three reasons that confrontation may be the better choice in your relationship with someone.

1. The matter dishonors God. (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 1 Corinthians 5:11,12; Romans 2:19-24)

When Queen Esther was told of Hamen's wicked plan to have all the Jews exterminated, she knew that it was a not time to forbear but to speak out. She didn't do it rashly, but prayerfully and thoughtfully. (Read the OT book of Esther for the story). She was afraid but she knew she had to confront.

2. The matter hurts the person (James 5:19-20; Galatians 6:1)

We are to be faithful to our friends and friendships and that means that if we observe someone caught in a repetitive harmful sin or habit, we need to speak to them gently about it. Do you have a friend who is flirting with disaster? Tempted with an affair? Playing with drugs? Abusing alcohol?

So many people have told me they wished someone would have come along side of them and lovingly warned them before they fell of the cliff. Hebrews tells us to encourage each other day after day lest any of us become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

3. The matter has damaged the relationship (Matthew 5:23 Matthew 18:15 Proverbs 16:28; Proverbs 17:9)

When someone repeatedly or grievously sins against us, this is not the time for forbearance but for talking. Matthew 5 and 18 tell us that if someone has sinned against us, or if we have something against another person, we are to go and make peace first before presenting our offering. Sometimes the relationship has been hurt or damaged by something someone has done. We can't just forbear or forgive. Even if we've tried, we can't let it go. We must talk about it or the relationship will deteriorate further.

How? Just like Queen Esther we need to have a plan.

To see my free article on how to have a difficult discussion with someone, go to <http://bit.ly/hVGXFS>.