

How to Talk with Someone about Sin



by EDWARD T. WELCH

You are about to read an excerpt from *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love*.¹ This book identifies the skills we need to help one another. It is for everyone—friends, parents, neighbors. God is pleased to use ordinary people, ordinary conversations, and extraordinary and wise love to do most of the heavy lifting in his kingdom.

We are meant to live this way. We are meant to walk side by side, an interdependent body of weak people. God is pleased to grow and change us through the help of people who have been re-created in Christ and empowered by the Spirit. That is how life in the church works.

And yet fear enters in. We are afraid to jump into the complexities of someone's life. Who are we to help someone else? Our past makes a mess of the present. Sin always threatens to overtake us. We feel broken ourselves and fear we will only make things worse for others. We feel unqualified.

So I am writing for people like me, who are willing to move toward other struggling people but are not confident that they can say or do anything very helpful. If you feel quite weak and ordinary—if you feel like a mess but have the Spirit—you have the right credentials. You are one of the ordinary people God uses to help others.

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This portion of the book is about how to talk to people about their sin—a very difficult but important task. First we will consider how to prepare ourselves to talk about sin and then we will get specific about how to actually offer this help.

Prepare to Talk about Sin

Talking together about sin tends to be the last thing we want to do. Who wants to talk about sin among friends? Suffering, yes. We can even see ourselves highlighting Satan's pernicious ways when someone is suffering. But to talk about sin? That seems so risky, so judgmental. When sin surfaces in another, we would much rather be silent and secretly judgmental than talk about it. We adopt a don't-ask-don't-tell policy, which avoids conflict and also protects us from being accused of sin ourselves.

Addressing sin is a tough one. How can we talk about sin with one another? Our church culture inadvertently communicates that preachers can talk publicly about sin, and a men's group convened to deal with pornography can talk about it, but as a general rule, it is impolite to talk about sin one on one.

The writer of Hebrews gives us a natural segue from suffering to sin. He just assumes that normal human beings have sin that clings, and hardships are a time when that clinging is even more apparent (Heb 12:1–2). He doesn't wag a finger. He just makes a basic observation.

But it is still hard.

To begin, we will consider *why* we talk about sin and then we will consider *how to prepare* ourselves for these conversations.

Why Bother?

Suffering and sin are the sum of human struggles. This means that we need one another in our struggle with suffering and in our struggle with sin and temptation. James wrote his final words on these very matters:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19–20)

“Save his soul from death” and potentially head off a future avalanche of sin—no one uses that kind of language with suffering. Suffering hurts more, but sin is more serious. Suffering will not last, but sin has consequences that reach into eternity.

In other words, when we put sin off limits, we cannot defend ourselves as being polite people who merely avoid meddling. Rather, we are like those who, during a leisurely walk, avoid eye contact with the dying person we almost trip over. We are neglecting matters of life and death.

But it is still hard. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well:

The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. . . . The fact is that we are all sinners!²

If we ignore our brothers' and sisters' sins, we have sinned against them, and we should ask their forgiveness. We need to move toward fellow sinners. We are family after all, and we know the perilous nature of a life apart from God.

To prepare ourselves to talk to people about sin, we look to grow in humility and patience.

Examine Yourself First

To prepare ourselves to talk to people about sin, we look to grow in humility and patience. We'll start with humility.

Humility. Humility means that we already see our sins as worse than others' sins, so we have no reason to defend ourselves when someone points them out (Matt 7:2–5). This does not mean we must publicly identify our own sins before we talk about sins in others. It means that we live as redeemed tax collectors (Luke 18:9–14) who have no confidence in our own righteousness but live because of God's lavish forgiveness and grace. Humility might be tested when you talk about someone's sin. The confronted person might say:

“Aren't you holier-than-thou!”

“Oh, and you have never done that?”

“Who are you to talk to me about such things?”

We can never predict someone's responses. Anger and defensiveness can come when we least expect it. In response, humility has nothing to defend: “It's funny you should say that I should look at myself first. I have actually spent time doing that, and I saw that my own heart is a good bit uglier than I thought. And I really am open to you talking about my sins. We can do that now. Then we can go back to what I was talking about earlier. I am trying to care for you in a way that I would want to be cared for.”

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 112.

Or here is another example of what you could say: “Am I saying things that are wrong or offensive?”

Humility is surprisingly sturdy in the face of anger. It includes a willingness to look at our own sins yet isn't diverted from our concern for another.

Patience. Patience is humility's partner. It is one of the identified fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), and it is a central feature of love (1 Cor 13:4), so it is essential to our ability to be helpful. It means that the one we are speaking with is like us—he does not respond perfectly, he changes slowly, and he needs a patient helper. There are times, though, when patience is not the best course. Sometimes we act immediately because someone is in physical danger. If we hear of a child abused or a wife threatened, we have to do something, and the first step is to get help from the larger community. More often, however, sin is a danger to the sinner more than it is to other people, and patience is the order of the day.

“I was thinking about our conversation last week. I know I brought up something that was hard and isn't easy to face. Could we talk about that?”

Patience does not think, “If I were her, I would be working harder on this.” Patience is interested in what direction people face. Do they face toward Jesus? Patience is more interested in direction and less interested in how fast people are changing.

A simple way to keep track of your humility and patience is to check for your own anger and its many variations, such as low-level frustration. When anger is present, humility and patience are absent.

See the Good and the Hard—First

When we talk to someone about his or her sins, it is, indeed, risky. What we hope to do is minimize the relational risks through love and wisdom. As a general rule, we can do that if we aim to see the good in others and their hard circumstances before we see the bad. That seems wise, and it fits the style of the apostle Paul's letters.

See the good. Have you ever pointed out the facets of the character of God you see in someone? We tend to be slow to do that, and if we are considering how to talk to someone about sin, those good words are even less likely to come up.

You might be wise to postpone any talk about sin until you have spoken words that build up (though talking about sin, done well, should certainly build up). This is a good policy with family and others we live with.

Be careful though. Most of us don't need justification for postponing a conversation about sinful actions. Sometimes we should speak sooner about sin rather than later. When uncertain, keep in mind that the aim is to speak respectfully,

in love, and to build up.

Acknowledge the hard circumstances. If you see a friend lash out at her children, you have certainly witnessed her sin, but lead with what is hard in her life rather than starting with her sin.

“It seems like you are really stressed this morning. How are you doing?”

Parents do this often with their children. After a child throws a brief tantrum, you might hear a wise parent say, “Honey, I am going to get you a snack now. Sometimes you get hungry after playing all afternoon.”

The hard things of life can provoke sin. As a general rule, we acknowledge those circumstances before we move on to the sin itself.

The parent is not ignoring the tantrum; she can raise the matter during the snack. Instead, she is identifying the hard circumstances of life and knows that these are times when the child is vulnerable.

This is also a way to approach an angry adult.

“Everything okay? You were really angry the other day. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like that.”

“Everything okay?” and “How are you doing?” open the conversation to circumstances of life that might be especially difficult. I can remember seeing sinful actions coincide with the anniversary of a loved one’s death, a stroke, a shocking medical diagnosis, and suspicions of a spouse’s infidelity.

Our sins can have mitigating circumstances. For example, killing in self-defense is not the same as murder for revenge. A tired child might be better served by a nap rather than a rebuke. The hard things of life can provoke sin. And, as a general rule, we acknowledge those circumstances before we move on to the sin itself.

One sin at a time. Here is one more principle: we don’t have to talk about every sin we witness or suspect. Just deal with one.

“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses” (Prov 10:12).

“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8).

These passages that talk about covering sin are tricky to interpret. They at least tell us that we do not have to confront every sin. Tensions appear throughout the body of

Christ every day. If we raise every slight against us, we will only increase those tensions.

The Lord does not wave all our sins in front of us, and they will not be waved in front of us for eternity. When we cover a sin, we participate in this unique feature of the gospel. Rather than speak to the sinner, sometimes wisdom means resting in the Spirit to do his work. At such times, we can learn more of the good in someone's story and witness how love is more powerful than sin.

“Be patient with them all” (1 Thess 5:14). This is not negotiable. Humility and patience are essential for speaking about sin or covering sin's offense with love.

Once we have prepared ourselves to talk about sin, now we offer help.

Help Fellow Sinners

This much is clear. Sin is our most dangerous problem. But there is help. The Spirit, the Word, and the community are God's primary means of doing battle with sin. Though we prefer to live and let live when it comes to sin, we know that God has called us to help one another face our sins. Human beings flourish when we do battle with sin rather than surrender to it. After all, “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and blameless before him*” (Eph 1:4).

So how can you and I help each other to do battle with sin and move in the direction of holiness? Sin is best raised in the context of faithful friendships where hardships have been shared and friends have prayed with each other. Then, within the context of those friendships, here are some occasions to speak up about sin:

- when someone faces temptations
- when you have seen sin
- when someone discloses and confesses sin.

Let's look at each one.

When Someone Faces Temptations

To be human is to experience temptations. That is certain. We also know that we take only a short step from temptation to desire and then from desire to sin. Here are some friends who might be particularly vulnerable to temptations:

- those who often travel overnight
- those who have lots of time alone or unaccounted for
- those who have a history of addictions or are taking an addictive substance such as narcotics
- those who spend time alone with the opposite sex
- college students
- those who are dating
- those who are rich or want to be rich (1 Tim 6:9–10).

To that list we could add all men and all women (regarding pornography and sexual temptations or obsessive diversions). Temptations are common to us all. We should be concerned if we can't identify them; we are blessed if we can.³

The goal is to bring temptations out into the open and grow in saying no to restless desires (Titus 2:11–12). The apostle Paul puts it this way:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.
 God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your
 ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of
 escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Cor 10:13)

The hardest sins to talk about are those we see someone commit, but we receive no invitation to speak.

The story behind Paul's words is when Israel had left Egypt and was traveling through the wilderness. With hardships and dangers everywhere, they were more susceptible to temptations to trust other things. So we also could add to our list of vulnerable people, those who are going through chronic hardship.

Many behaviors that we call addictions start in the wilderness—times when life seems too hard. Life is difficult, and we prefer to avoid pain. God is not giving us the deliverance we want, so we look for relief in idols. We drink, turn to porn, eat, smoke, snort, inject, take pills, play video games, read fantasy—all of these reveal our modern idols.

“What temptations are stalking you?”

“Can I pray for you on your next business trip? How about if you call when you get there and we can pray together?”

“You have been in a hard place for a long time, and the longer it goes, the bigger the temptation to take matters into our own hands. With 1 Corinthians 10:13 in mind, how can I pray for those times when you face temptations?”

These are the questions to ask one another.

And if we think for a moment that God is asking us to be dour stoics who are banned from all fun, then we can be sure that we have lost a round in the

³ All of us are tempted to diverse sins. We could add many other specifics, e.g., temptations that arise from everyday circumstances—unbelief, forgetting God, irritation, grumbling, worry, self-righteousness, etc. These tend to be viewed as less serious than the sexual and addictive sins I've mentioned, but they, too, are important to speak about when you suspect friends are vulnerable to them.

spiritual battle. Our faith and obedience in temptation might be hard, but they bring maturity and satisfaction to life (James 1:2–4). Our God “richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17). As such, saying no *protects* our capacity for enjoyment rather than diminishes it.

When You Have Seen Sin

The hardest sins to talk about are those we see someone commit, but we receive no invitation to speak. We must decide if the sin is to be called out or covered. Here are some thoughts about when not to be silent, and then, how to speak, if we decide to go forward.

Don't be silent out of fear. Most people who have witnessed sin, or are even suspicious of it in another, don't regret raising it when they raised it well. But they do regret it if they kept silent.

A church was left dazed when both a men's leader and a women's leader left their spouses, wrote a goodbye note to their families, and disappeared together. As a plan for pastoral care gradually developed, over a dozen people in the church said, “I should have said something.” They had observed the way the two leaders had interacted and spoken about each other. They regretted their silence.

When sin becomes public, especially when it is sin that damages relationships or incurs legal problems, so many think, “I should have said something.” Yet we are slow to remember these mental notes. Our fear of people's angry reactions, the myth that help is needed only when asked for, and our sense that we have no right to say anything because we ourselves are quite a mess—these contribute to safe relationships rather than loving ones.

Don't be silent out of anger. If the sin has been against you, then anger is even a bigger problem than fear. The Old Testament puts it this way: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him” (Lev 19:17). When angry, we might be excellent at talking to others about someone's sin, but wretched at talking to the actual sinner. Meanwhile, just a smidgeon of humility would remind us that we are rivaling the very sin we oppose as we stand in prideful judgment. If we are stuck in anger, *we* are the needy ones, and we ask for help with our anger before we approach the person who has sinned against us.

Get help. If you have any questions about how to proceed, ask for help. We are part of a larger body, and we will often ask the larger body to help us to help others. And even when we ask for help, we proceed carefully. Confidences are important to us, and we want to speak well of people, so we might ask anonymously.

“I think I should speak to someone about something I witnessed. Could you help me know what to say and even whether I should say it?”

A pastor would be an ideal person to ask.

Just the facts. The task is to hold up a mirror so that others see themselves more than they see you. Tell what you have actually seen. Avoid interpretations and usually stay away from speaking of how the actions might have hurt or disappointed you—that can wait for another time. Here are some examples of just the facts:

“The other day I saw you walking down the street with Rich [not her husband]. Is everything okay? Should I be concerned?”

“At the church meeting, you seemed pretty angry. I noticed that everyone went silent after you spoke, as if they were afraid to say anything. Could we talk about that?”

“You seemed on edge this morning. When I asked about your upcoming day, you said my question was stupid. Is something wrong?”

“I was thinking about our conversation the other day. When you talked about Jackie, you seemed to be holding some things against her. Could we talk about that?”

“When we were talking about your marriage, everything was about her—it was all her fault—and nothing was your own. I know things are complicated, but isn't our goal to be seeing our own faults long before we see our spouse's?”

Yes, any one of those comments would be difficult for most of us to say. But we are compelled by love. How would you want to be approached by someone who is aware of your public sin?

Be prepared for possible negative reactions. It doesn't always go well. The person we approach might get mad at us, which means we have probably identified something important. Anger is usually a self-indictment. Or the person becomes upset because we have been clumsy, self-righteous, or judgmental, in which case we are saddened, ask forgiveness, and grow in wisdom.

And what if the other does not accept our words and refuses to hear? Perhaps we wait, perhaps we persist because the matter is so important, perhaps we get advice from a wise friend, or perhaps we enlist someone else who has witnessed the sinful behavior and go together (Matt 18:15–16). Love orients us. Though fear or anger blinds us, love and the best interests of others guide us.

When Someone Discloses and Confesses Sin

When someone *discloses* sin, our help takes a different form, because the Spirit has already been on the move: the one sinning has taken the struggle public. The step from private to public is the biggest and hardest. Everything else is easy in comparison.

So when someone discloses sin, first, we see the good. Voluntary confession is

evidence of spiritual power and deserves our admiration.

“Thank you so much for confessing this. I know there is more to be done, but no one can say what you said, apart from the Holy Spirit. This is real evidence that God is clutching on to you and won’t let you go.”

When someone discloses sin, our help takes a different form, because the Spirit has already been on the move.

Here are some thoughts on where to go from there.

Don’t simply commiserate. A common mistake is either to match sin for sin or to sympathize in some way.

“I have struggled with porn too.”

“She drives me crazy too.”

Though the goal might be to make someone feel less alone or embarrassed by the confession, commiserating doesn’t help. It shifts the conversation away from what is most important. Instead, keep the focus on the issue at hand. We want to partner in an all-out battle against sin. The Spirit has started something, and we want to keep in step with what he is doing.

“What can I do to help?”

“What can *we* do to fight?”

“Let’s develop a plan.”

“Let’s bring in some other people who can help.”

To stay on track, offer partnership, humility, and patience but not commiseration.

Get to the heart. Our understanding of sin is that it is a matter of the heart, which means that we are part of a process of redirecting the person’s compass toward Jesus. Sin is about the Lord. It is personal and relational. God calls us friends, and when we sin, we temporarily abandon our connection to him. We prefer to manage aspects of our lives in our own way; we love our desires more than we love Jesus. At those times we need to be reminded of who God is and what he has done, who we are, and how we live in light of God’s Word.

And this is what God has done: he has moved toward us with initiating love. We simply respond to this love offensive—that is always the way of change. We call it “grace.” That does not mean we are passive. It means that our lives are always responsive to God’s first move toward us.

This strategy began with the Ten Commandments. The opening words are,

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20:2). God identifies who he is—the gracious God who acts first.

Then he identifies who we are—a people once enslaved, now liberated, forgiven, and brought into the house of God.

Then he teaches us how to shape our lives according to the pattern of our Liberator.

The apostle Paul follows this same pattern. When you notice a “therefore” in his letters, it usually means that he has just told us about who Jesus is and what he has done, and he will now show us how to live for Jesus. What is important is that we begin with God.

So what has really been going on in the person’s heart? Here are some clues:

“God cannot see me when I turn away from him.” We don’t actually say this but our actions reveal that we believe it.

“I have more freedom when I turn back to ‘Egypt.’”

“I’m only human. Everyone sins. It’s not treason, spiritual adultery, holding God in contempt, or dishonoring him.”

“I have to be a better person now to get back into God’s good graces.”

“God is very upset rather than compassionate and merciful.”

Each of these beliefs is an opportunity for confession and affirming the truth. If you feel less than competent at countering lies with truth, get help from those who can, and learn together.

Through it all, keep Jesus Christ in view. Here are just a few ways to do this:

Read and talk about your favorite passage from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, or read through a New Testament book together.

Have your friend read through her favorite passage about Jesus.

Talk about the things of first importance—the death and resurrection of Jesus—and consider how that shapes the way we live.

Do you feel stuck? Pray together and enlarge the circle of those who help.

Develop a plan. The knowledge of Jesus and a renewed allegiance to him lead to concrete action. Some decide to share their websites with each other. Others confess to those who were sinned against and consider amends where they might be appropriate. Others will walk away from a verbal fight rather than fuel it. There is something about the love of God that makes us very creative in generating concrete, small steps.

We stay away from vague, “I’m just going to try harder” kinds of commitments and instead have clear plans for how to do battle with Satan and sin and how to love

others deeply from our hearts.

Is there a whiff of hopelessness? When hope fades, Satan is usually all over it. It's time to get help.

Any time you are feeling overwhelmed, or in over your head, get help. Why take on someone's burdens alone when a larger community is better equipped to carry the load?

Recognize the messy nature of growth and change. As we walk together, we observe the power of the Spirit. What could be better? The process, however, might be hard to see at first.

Spiritual growth is like other patterns we see around us. It is barely perceptible from day to day. The baby has gained only an ounce or two, which is too little to be seen with the naked eye. The flower planted yesterday looks much the same today. And what if the baby gets sick or the flower is under-watered? For a moment, they might seem to be moving in the wrong direction. But week to week we can usually see something—an emerging double chin, a bulge on a stem that will become another flower.

In humans, this spiritual process is called “progressive sanctification.” It means that growth and change are happening (Phil 1:6), but not always as quickly as we would like.

So we keep our eyes peeled. If the person has the Spirit, we will see growth, though that growth is a spiritual battle.

Jim gave himself to alcohol for a decade. He finally went to rehab and some AA meetings because his wife was done threatening and was packing up to leave. In all that turmoil, he became a follower of Jesus. But he was confused. Nothing magical happened. He woke the next day with the same cravings and temptations. Where, he wondered, was the power of God?

A couple of wise friends noticed his despair. In response they were able to point out spiritual power in his life. Since he had changed spiritual allegiances, he had been crying out in prayer, and he had been doing that every day.

In other words, he was needy, which is a glorious step to being more fully human, as God intended. “Help” spoken to the Lord is power. The struggle itself is evidence of power; it means that he has been equipped to fight and is no longer a mere slave.

Mostly, spiritual power and growth feel like weakness, as if we just barely make it through the day.

Lead in saying “Thank you” to God. As a hedge against hopelessness and

despair, and as a way to affirm our dependence on the Lord, lead the confessing one in saying “thank you.”

“Thank you” means that we live because God graciously forgives our sins once and for all in Jesus. We are forgiven, not because we are so contrite and forgivable, but because God’s name is honored as he forgives us.

“Thank you” means that we are needy people, and, in forgiveness of sins and the Spirit’s power, we have everything we need.

“Help” spoken to the Lord is power.

“Thank you” means that there is no long trip back to God after we come to our senses and turn from our sin. No, indeed. Wherever we go, all we do is turn around, and our God is right there.

So, we have considered three occasions to help people talk about their sin:

- when someone faces temptations
- when you have seen sin
- when someone discloses and confesses sin.

Help will not be easy on these occasions, but it is help we can all give.

A Community Works Best Side by Side

A man was sitting across the table from his friend, talking about important matters—a recent confession of daily pornography use, a hard marriage, financial problems. As they were slogging through this debris, the man sensed that something was askew. He didn’t like the way that he and his friend were sitting. So he got up and moved his chair so that he was *next to* rather than across from his friend, and...everything changed. Information became much more personal, tears flowed, prayer was natural. Side by side is most suitable for helping. We nudge the person beside us with affection; we take one another by the hand; we place a reassuring hand on a shoulder; we put an arm around the one next to us.

We notice the same positioning in Jesus’ life on earth. He is Immanuel, God-with-us, so he was always eating a meal with people, sitting side by side. Keep that dinner table in view as you discuss people’s sin. Remember, God uses ordinary people in ordinary settings to do *extraordinary* things in his kingdom.

Discussion and Response

This is a challenging task. Here are a few questions to help focus your thinking.

1. Have you ever been confronted about your sin in a way that was edifying and fruitful? What made it helpful?
2. Have you ever been confronted about your sin in a way that was *un*edifying and hurtful? What made it so?
3. When might you cover rather than confront a sin?
4. Are you willing to talk to someone about sin?
5. Do you believe you can do the things we've covered in this article? If so, have you actually done them? How did it go? If not, where do you need to grow?

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