



Guiltless Living

Confessions of a Serial Sinner

Captured by the Grace of God

GINGER HUBBARD

Author of Don't Make Me Count to Three!



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Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners
—of whom I am the worst.

1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV)

Introduction

The Bible teaches us to “confess your sins to each other” (James 5:16). I believe that when we are willing to be open and honest about our own struggles, God uses that openness to encourage others to do the same. In writing for several national publications, I am often attacked for my transparency. It never fails. Anytime I acknowledge the wickedness of my heart by revealing a sinful attitude or action that brought God’s conviction, I receive many condemning emails. Statements such as, “I can’t believe you call yourself a Christian!” and “You are an evil wolf in sheep’s clothing!” fill my inbox.

Throughout this book you may find some of the things I reveal about myself shocking. There will be some who conclude, “This woman is horrible! She has no business writing a book or teaching the Word of God.” You may be tempted to send me a letter telling me what a wicked sinner I am. Please, if you have that temptation, I hope you save your paper and ink or your fingertips. I know I am a sinner. I am fully aware of how wicked my heart can be. As a matter of fact, if the apostle Paul were alive today, I would challenge him for ownership of his words, “Christ died for sinners—of whom I am the worst.”

In reading some of my confessions, you may find me unlikable at times. But I will not sugarcoat the wickedness of my heart. When sin rears its head, there is nothing likable about it. It’s ugly, dark, shocking, and offensive, especially when we are willing to search our hearts and be fully honest about what is there. I hope that an honest, transparent revelation of what sin looks like will provoke deep thought and self-evaluation in the hearts of my readers. The Bible states, “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Prov. 28:13).

There are dangers I risk in sharing my confessions. While I may fail in my attempt to avoid these dangers, I want you to at least understand my motive. Sometimes, when we step back and look

at our behavior, we find it so ridiculous that it becomes humorous. But let me clarify one thing here. Sin is not a laughing matter. The things that God sent his Son to die for are not funny. However, I see nothing wrong with laughing at ourselves and how ridiculously we behave at times. My motive is not to make light of sin, but to acknowledge how utterly foolish I can be when I am living out of my sinful nature rather than in Christ. Once I have repented, I often find myself shaking my head with a dumbfounded grin on my face as I look back on my own foolishness and say to my Savior, “Lord, how ridiculous I would be apart from you!”

Another risk I run in sharing examples of my foolishness is giving the impression that I am boasting in sin. It bothers me to hear a testimony where the Christian spends more time detailing his colorful past than what Jesus has done to restore and redeem him. Please know that I am opening the dark chapters of my heart only to offer a greater appreciation for the Book of Life, which tells of the glorious grace of God toward repentant sinners. I do not wish to boast in sin, but in the great things God has done and continues to do in my life, in hopes that you might open yourself up for the same.

Some of you will relate to my transparency. You desire the Holy Spirit to search your heart for hidden sin and you welcome any avenue for God’s work to be done in your life. Others will find my confessions offensive and will harbor an attitude of condemnation toward me. I do not say this to be harsh, just as I do not wave my dirty laundry to be offensive or to merely satisfy curious minds as to the depths of my sins. I confess in hopes that it will encourage you to search your own heart. Through searching comes revelation, which leads to confession, which leads to repentance, which leads to forgiveness, which leads to sanctification, which leads to a deeper, more real relationship with God.

Without acknowledgment of sin, there can be no repentance or forgiveness. In other words, if we are not being “real,” the work of God’s Spirit within us is hindered. Shallow confessions result in a shallow work of the Spirit. It’s when we are willing to hand over hidden sins, the ones we would rather not admit are buried in our hearts, that we drink deeply from the living waters of God’s goodness

and grace. That's my desire for you. The Bible says, "The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out" (Prov. 20:5).

Please know that my aim is for us all to grow closer to Jesus. I humbly challenge you to consider your reaction to the shocking truths of my heart. As you do, ask yourself two questions: Am I willing to acknowledge my own sinful capabilities? Do I extend God's grace to sinners through my attitudes and actions toward them?

We cannot fully appreciate the depths of God's holiness until we fully acknowledge the depths of our sinfulness. It is for this reason that God calls Christians to be real. The sooner we face the reality of our depravity, the sooner we accept God's atonement for that depravity and enter into the freedom of *guiltless living*.



The Critical Serial Sinner

and the Encouraging Grace of God

My friend Marlo and I led a “Girls at Heart” conference together in a state I will not name. We found out that we are like oil and water when it comes to our responses to tough situations. Marlo goes with the flow, looks at the positive side of things, and remains cheerful in the midst of not-so-ideal circumstances. Me? Let’s just say I don’t.

I was critical of the town the minute we stepped off the plane. It was my first visit to this particular state and I was not impressed. I have encountered chicken houses, paper mills, and pastures before, but nothing compared to the foul odor of this town. It followed us from the airport to the restaurant we dined in, to the church, and to the hotel. It was like being caged in an inescapable stink prison. We were told that the odor was from the manure used to fertilize the fields—all fifty bazillion acres of them. My hair stank, my clothes stank, and even the pillow I brought from home seemed to absorb the smell. It was nauseating.

During the three-hour drive from the airport to the town where we were to speak, we reacted like polar opposites. Marlo had her head sticking out the window like a Cocker Spaniel puppy taking in the scenery, while I had one hand on the steering wheel and the other covering my nose and mouth. “How could you possibly be enjoying this?” I whined through a pinched nasal passage. “It’s like a doo-doo bomb exploded! This is so nasty! Get your head back in the car so I can roll up the windows!” Always the encourager, Marlo

replied, “Oh, it’s not that bad! We’ll get used to it. Have you ever seen so many pastures? What beautiful land! And just look at those storybook farmhouses! This is amazing!”

Amazingly stinky, I thought.

The conference went well, but I never got used to the foul odor. I was more than ready to say my goodbyes, leave the kind people to their stinky state, and hightail it back to Alabama. On the return drive to the airport, we discovered that I had made a mistake in coordinating our flight departure times. While Marlo would arrive in plenty of time to make her flight, my flight was scheduled to leave in two hours. We were still two hours shy of reaching the airport. I panicked, stomped the accelerator pedal, and started complaining about how far we had to drive from Smellville to the airport. “I’ll never make it in time,” I complained. “They should have flown us into a closer airport so we didn’t have to drive so far. And if they had any consideration at all, the least they could have done is provide us with gas masks!”

To make matters worse, the rental car was running on empty. I hadn’t noticed that we were low on gas until the warning signal beeped. “We haven’t passed an exit in miles, so surely one is coming up,” Marlo chirped. No such luck. There we were, two southern belles, out in the middle of nowhere, about to run out of gas. Pasture after pasture whizzed by for many miles, but no exits. The needle on the fuel gauge pointed below empty. Just when I was about to go on a rampage, drunk from panic, impatience, and toxic cow patty fumes, an exit appeared over the horizon like a mirage. My breathing steadied and hope rose in my chest. However, at the end of the exit ramp, we found no gas stations, no stores, no phones, nothing. There were only more pastures and more stink. Correction: there was one house, but believe me when I say that no one in her right mind would have approached it. We’re talking *Silence of the Lambs*. We felt confident that if we were to knock on the door, one or both of us would wind up in someone’s freezer.

Sweet, patient, positive Marlo set to praying. “Dear Lord, we know that you are with us. We are really frightened and desperate. Please give us direction and lead us to safety.” She was a picture of

faith. Ginger the critic yelled, “This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen! Why have an exit that leads to nothing? No gas! No phones! No civilization! What’s the matter with these people? Who would live here? There’s something seriously wrong with this town, Marlo! I mean, where do they buy gas, and groceries, and clothes? This isn’t a town; it’s the *Twilight Zone*! What are we going to do? Our cells have no signal, and there’s no one around for miles. We’re going to die in this God-forsaken, rancid place!”

After ten more miles, we finally entered a town. It reminded me of the deserted ghost towns featured in old Westerns. A tumbleweed rolled by. We spotted a parking lot full of cars in front of a school. It was Sunday morning, so we assumed the school was being used as a church, which would explain the full parking lot. Hoping someone could direct us to a gas station, I wheeled up beside the double doors and bolted out of the car in search of a rescuer. Much to my surprise and disappointment, the doors were locked with chains, and the milky windows revealed an empty building. It was at this point that I completely lost it. “Where is everyone, Marlo?” I exploded. “This is the most insane day of my life! This nightmare is never going to end! We’re trapped in an Alfred Hitchcock movie and I’m not even wearing clean underwear! We’ll never make it to a gas station!” Desperate and very close to tears, I plopped down into the car and pounded the steering wheel, while Marlo gently reminded, “God is in control. He will see us through this.”

We spotted a lady sporting a robe and pink fuzzy slippers walking her dog. When we inquired about gas, she scratched her head as if we had all the time in the world and replied, “Gas, you say? Don’t reckon we got no gas stations ‘round here. You gone have to take to the highway for oh, say twenty miles or so, ‘fore you come up on a gas station.” At this point, I was catatonic, so Marlo took over the conversation. “Surely you know someone who has some gas close by?” Marlo smiled. More scratching of the head. “Well, I think Herman keeps some gas at his place. You can probably find Herman over at Joe’s bar, two blocks down and on the left.” We thanked the lady and set off to find Herman, both of us thinking the same thing: *A bar at ten o’clock on Sunday morning . . . um . . . okay.*

Herman was like an angel in overalls. He left his stool in Joe's, had us follow him to his place, and filled our tank to full. I actually made my flight three minutes before they closed the gate. However, I can't say that I got an "A" for attitude.

Critical Serial Sinner: A fault-finding destroyer of good who chooses to search for bad in people or situations, compulsively voices negativity, and lives in bondage to an ungrateful heart.

The Encouraging Grace of God

In some ways, Jesus encountered a similar situation with the woman at the well. However, he handled it much differently. Jews considered Samaria a "stinky" state. The thought of being contaminated typically kept the Jews away, but Jesus purposely went there. Upon arrival Jesus was tired from the day but, rather than criticizing the town and its occupants, he offered the woman at the well the gift of God's living water (John 4:10). When her initial response was to throw the gift back in his face and basically accuse him of thinking he was better than everybody else, Jesus didn't retaliate with justified criticism. He didn't throw her down the well and walk off mumbling about what he did and did not deserve. What he did do was patiently explain, " 'Everyone who drinks this water [well water] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life' " (John 4:13-14).

Jesus didn't enter the stinky state looking to get his tank filled the way I did. He went to fill the tank of another. Interestingly, the first thing he asked the woman for was a drink of water. I find it curious that there is no record that Jesus ever got any. He wanted water, he asked for water, but he wound up putting his needs aside to encourage and fill the needs of another. In fact, the woman wound up testifying to the ways in which Jesus encouraged her, and as a

result many believed in him (John 4:39). That's a far cry from how I handled things in the stinky state. I went seeking to get my own tank filled without a single thought of filling someone else's. Oh, the differences between a serial sinner and the Savior of the world! I pray that next time I'll be more like him in my responses.

Jesus walked all the way to a different town—he didn't own a Chevy Tahoe—to encourage others. I have been guilty of avoiding eye contact with someone I recognize in the grocery store in order to guard my time. The comparison sends a shiver of conviction down my spine. How many times could I have taken a moment to speak kind words to a friend who may have been in desperate need of encouragement? How many opportunities were snuffed out by my selfishness? How many times did a critical attitude toward a situation keep me from ministering to someone in need? It's scary to think about.

We may attempt to excuse our critical attitudes by saying Jesus didn't face the same situations and temptations that we face. Life is busier today. He had more time to be an encourager than we do. Not true. It is written in Hebrews, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (4:15). Jesus encountered every temptation. He endured trying days, tough situations, hard-headed people, blatant offenses, and personal attacks, each time setting an example that we might follow.

However, Jesus also knew we would fall short. Because we are serial sinners, we will not always put others first. We can thank God that he has already atoned for the sins of selfishness and critical attitudes. When we blow it, we can seek forgiveness and begin again. Because of Jesus' work at Calvary, we do not have to live in constant guilt when we mess up. We can receive his forgiveness, accept his atonement, and move forward in his grace.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, reviled as a sinner and overall "bad guy" by the local townspeople (Luke 19:1-9). I picture him as a balding little man with sweaty palms and a shady shrewdness. Think of the character Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life*. He was a man who seemed worthy of criticism, but rather than criticiz-

ing Zacchaeus's bad points as the others did, Jesus befriended and encouraged him. He could have taken small jabs and gotten a chuckle out of the others. He could have yelled up to the top of the sycamore tree, "Hey, Shortstop! Come on down here and I'll let you chat with me." Instead, he encouraged Zacchaeus by choosing to visit his home. Jesus singled him out from all the people standing around, the man least likely to be chosen. Jesus astonished everyone by honoring the least honorable man there. As a result, Zacchaeus's heart was changed forever through the power of loving encouragement.

Matthew 8 records Jesus healing a man with leprosy. I imagine that the man looked pretty bad, yet Jesus made no critical remark about his appearance. He saw only the man's heart, and he went after it. He encouraged the man through touch and healed him both physically and spiritually. Many people are encouraged through touch. I love for someone to touch my arm in greeting or to hug me as I'm leaving. I feel encouraged when my husband puts his arm around me or a friend pats my back. I remember an instance when I was upset about something and my friend Lisa kissed my hand, with her compassion overflowing. It was a radical show of love and encouraged me so deeply that I will never forget it.

During Jesus' time on earth, he was never given to criticism, even when he was sinned against. Sometimes, even after we forgive, we want to "discuss" the issue, which typically involves dragging someone else through the mud of condemnation. There have been times when I have forgiven my husband for something but then wanted to talk through the details of the offense, often more than once. Jesus didn't do that. He didn't hash over every detail of what people did wrong. He encouraged them, not only through forgiveness, but also through the mercy of not raking them over the coals in a critical fashion. For example, when Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, he didn't even mention the outward sin she had committed. He covered it with forgiveness and encouraged her with simple words, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

Jesus always followed forgiveness with encouragement. His forgiveness and encouragement were exemplified in the life of the father who welcomed home his prodigal son without criticism. The father

may have been tempted to say to his repentant boy, “Son, I forgive you, but I do want to talk about what you did with all that money. How much of it was spent on wine? How much was spent on women? Let’s discuss why what you did was wrong and how deeply it hurt your mother and me.” The father recognized the important thing: the young man was broken and repentant. The son returned wholeheartedly to his father, and that outweighed everything he did before. The father made a choice to encourage rather than criticize. And it was a choice that honored God, blessed his son, and bore witness to the power of the gospel.

Jesus set the example of looking at all situations from an eternal perspective. When we view every situation through the lens of the gospel, we see God’s goodness. There is a great theological debate over who causes what. I won’t get into it because I am no theologian. However, humans by nature have a tendency to spiritually judge situations according to the way they feel to us. If something feels bad, we tend to adopt a critical attitude and point fingers at Satan. If something feels good, we praise God for the great thing he has done. Rather than arguing over who caused what to happen, it is better to focus on which perspective or lens we will view it through—the eternal or the temporal. Through the eternal lens we are reminded that “in all things [good and bad] God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

I’m not saying that there isn’t a Devil or that sickness is not the result of the fall of man. I am saying that if we only perceive bad situations as the work of Satan or blame them on someone else, we develop a critical attitude and miss what God has for us. God desires us to get beyond the way a situation looks or feels and live in the hope that he is in control of all things. In believing this, we are able to “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for [us] in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18).

Joseph was a man whose life reflected the example of Christ, though he lived many centuries earlier. In recalling a negative situation, he exhibited his faith in God through the words he said to his brothers: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for

good...” (Gen. 50:20). Joseph trusted that God was in control of even the worst situations. Therefore, he praised God rather than criticize his brothers for the hardships he had suffered. When we are willing to trust God even in bad situations, critical thinking melts away and we begin to respond as Jesus responded to his upcoming encounter with evil in the garden of Gethsemane: “Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” (John 18:11). The cup the *Father* has given me. Facing death by crucifixion would certainly qualify as the worst of situations. Yet Jesus didn’t ask, “Why me?” He didn’t criticize those involved with the evil done against him. He knew that the Father’s plan served a much higher purpose than the temporal situation.

Jesus never criticized or complained, always encouraged, and always exemplified what it means to trust the Father in all things. Through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, God enables his children to do the same. And when his children disregard the power of the Holy Spirit and fall into critical thinking and behavior, he graciously atones for their sins. What a good God we serve!

God Calls Christians to Encourage

Throughout Scripture, God commands us to encourage one another. In Hebrews we are told to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (10:24), and in 1 Thessalonians we are instructed to “encourage one another and build each other up” (5:11). As I studied these verses, one word suddenly jumped off the page with deeper meaning. I became intrigued with the word “consider.” We are to “*consider* how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” According to Webster’s Dictionary, *consider* means to “think about seriously; to take into account; to show consideration for; to regard highly.”¹ In specifically applying these definitions to the context of speaking encouragement into the lives of others, we must think seriously before we speak; take into account how our words might be perceived before they are spoken; show consideration for the feelings, circumstances, and best interests of the one who will receive the words; and regard highly (above ourselves) the person to whom the words are directed.

Consideration takes time but it prevents critical words from being spoken. Solomon puts it more fluently. “The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil” (Prov. 15:28). Consideration is not done off the cuff. It’s not speaking the first thing that pops into our heads. It’s not blurting out words under the influence of anger, impatience, or frustration. It’s taming the tongue to restrain itself and yield to careful consideration before wagging, lest we discourage others and receive an SUI (Speaking Under the Influence) citation from the Holy Spirit.

Let’s continue the story we started at the beginning of the chapter. Upon my return to the Atlanta airport from Smellville, I was still faced with a ninety-minute drive home. Marlo had flown back to her home state, so I was traveling the last stretch alone. It was late and I was cranky. The two vanilla lattes with extra cream were putting on the pressure. The sign read ten miles to the next exit. *Déjà vu* set in. *Twilight Zone* music came out of nowhere. Was the saga to continue? The lattes were screaming for release so, as Sally Field so eloquently put it in *Smokey and the Bandit*, I put the pedal to the metal. Unfortunately, I came up behind the equivalent of *Sanford and Son*. Lamont had spent the whole day collecting treasures, and Fred was cautiously driving a good twenty miles under the speed limit. As an extra precaution for avoiding an accident and ensuring the safety of all the valuables, the junkmobile was straddling the divider lines in order to prevent anyone from passing. *Why me, Lord?*

Finally, after ten miles of excruciating pain, I made it to McDonalds, where I encountered Mrs. Grump. Apparently, her day had been worse than mine. While walking past the registers on the way to the porcelain oasis, her dirty-look dagger hit me squarely between the eyes. Ignoring it, I went about my business.

A few minutes later when I headed past the registers again, her suspicions were confirmed. I had only stopped in to use the restroom. Shame, shame, shame on me! Mrs. Grump was not pleased. In fact, she was quite angry and unwilling to let the moment pass without voicing her grievances.

“Excuse me, Ma’am?” She growled.

“Yes?” I turned.

She then bit my head off. “My restrooms are only for paying customers.”

This was not a good day for pushing my buttons. Blood went to my face and sarcasm bit back through my fake-sweet voice. “First off, judging from your ever-so-typical bad-employee attitude, I seriously doubt that this is *your* restaurant or *your* restrooms, so let’s get a grip as to your status on the Who’s Who List in the McDonald’s Hall of Fame, shall we? Second, in light of the hundreds of Happy Meals I’ve purchased over the years, I really don’t think Ronald would mind my using his toilet without placing an order this one time.” She was speechless. I left.

Now, I ask, how did my response to Mrs. Grump line up with God’s command to consider others better than myself, to return evil with good, and to encourage those I encounter? Did my behavior earn a “good and faithful servant” pat on the back or an SUI citation? After I cooled off, a verse in Proverbs came to mind. “The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18). Oh, the venom I can spew from my reckless tongue!

Had I taken time to *consider* my words in light of God’s commands, I would have handled the situation much differently. I would have looked at this woman through the eyes of Jesus. Why was she so angry? What hard things in life had she suffered? Did her parents love her? Had someone hurt her? Had she been lied to all her life? Did she know the way to the Father who loves her more than anyone had ever loved her? Had she ever experienced the grace and mercies of God? Did she even know how she could?

Had I reined in my tongue and taken a few seconds to consider this precious creation of God rather than myself, I might have impacted her life for the sake of the gospel. I might have been used by God to change her life forever. I might have smiled warmly, purchased a drink, and asked her about her day. I might have spoken encouragement into her life and perhaps planted a seed of hope in her heart. But I didn’t. God forgive me.

Now that I have confessed yet another time I behaved like a Christian jerk, please allow me to share about a time when I actually got it right. It happens from time to time, but be assured, it’s

only through God's grace in my life. I was pregnant with our second child. Because our first child arrived four weeks early, I was closely monitored during the last two trimesters. The nurse assigned to me either didn't like people in general or just didn't like me. She constantly made negative, insensitive comments. She was a Nazi when it came to taking prenatal vitamins, attending Lamaze class, and living by the book as a good pregnant woman. I broke all the rules. I was extremely sick all the way through my pregnancies. It was difficult for me to gain weight because I could rarely keep food down. While many women struggle with extra weight, I only gained baby weight, eleven pounds total with my second child. At eight months I looked like a green bean that had swallowed a basketball.

Nurse Nazi went down her chart checking "No" in answer to questions such as, "Have you faithfully taken your vitamins? Have you completed Lamaze? Will you be having the baby naturally without an epidural? Will you be breast-feeding?" With every answer her pen pressed a little harder on the chart, her eyebrows went a little higher, and her lips pressed a little tighter. I had not followed her rules. Then came the mean comments. "Well, on a positive note, I see that you've managed to stay nice and trim. Although that's not what's best for the baby, that cute little figure of yours will snap right back," she said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

More subtle accusations were fired, but I had made up my mind to love Nurse Nazi regardless of how she treated me. Although I was tempted to retaliate, I chose not to criticize her bedside manners or personal hang-ups with rigid rule-following and thin women. I wanted God's love to flow through me to bless this woman. I overlooked her comments, took an interest in her life, asked questions that showed I cared, and spoke encouraging words into her heart. As I did those things, God gave me a love for this woman that passed understanding.

In the end Nurse Nazi and I shared a sweet bond. As overworked as she was, she requested to be my nurse during delivery and doted on me with extra acts of kindness, such as wiping my face with a cool cloth, fetching ice chips for me, and massaging my shoulders and legs. She became my labor room angel. What changed her attitude

toward me? It wasn't me. It was the sweet, unconditional love of Christ working through me. It was a win-win situation for me and for her. Jesus did all the work, I got the benefit of shoulder and leg rubs, and Nurse Not-So-Nazi-Like-Anymore experienced the grace and mercies of the God who loves her. Not a bad deal.

God gives us the key for locking up critical words when we have been sinned against. It's called forbearance, and it's accomplished through love. Forbearance is an act of love and mercy that so completely covers wrongs committed against us that we truly forgive and forget. It chooses not to ponder the sins of others, especially the ones that inflict personal hurt, and instead dwells on how we might glorify God by blessing those around us regardless of their behavior.

At times forbearance is hardest to grant when the other person is your spouse. When your spouse sins against you with the fiery darts of unkind words, forbearance hurries to throw on a wet blanket. Forbearance does two things here: it covers the fire, protecting your mate from dangerous sparks, and it puts out the fire before it sets you ablaze, eliminating the possibility of an explosion.

In order to get a clear picture of forbearance, let's first take a look at what it is not. It is not shelving the sin to use as ammunition later. It is not begrudgingly ignoring the sin in order to take the high road. It is not pretending it did not happen in order to be the bigger person. It is not sulking secretly on the inside while outwardly faking kindness. These responses only reveal a type of self-serving, prideful retaliation that is not rooted in genuine love for the other person. They are rooted in the ground of self-preservation. In other words, they make us feel better about ourselves but accomplish nothing by way of the mercy, grace, and forgiveness that we are to offer through Christ.

Now let's look at what forbearance *is*. It is the willingness to overlook the offense and completely cast it away. It is the merciful choice to wipe the slate clean for the good of the other person. It is a love offering, folded in an envelope of true forgiveness and placed at the foot of the cross. It is the conscious outpouring of undeserved grace. It is the beautiful expression of mercy from a heart attitude of love.

I must caution you briefly on one point. Forbearance is not an excuse to avoid discussing or rebuking dangerous sin patterns in someone you love. Clearly, we are to lovingly rebuke those who are caught up in sin, to free them from enslavement. I know wives who sweep their husband's sin patterns under the rug due to a misguided understanding of forbearance. The forbearance I'm writing about is for minor offenses, such as a sharp word, something said in the heat of the moment, or a grouchy attitude. When we cover these types of personal offenses with forbearance, we demonstrate patience, wisdom, and love. Solomon said, "A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense" (Prov. 19:11).

Perhaps the easiest time to succumb to the temptation of criticism is after we have been sinned against, yet we are warned not to "repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing" (1 Peter 3:9). How do we do this? We take captive critical thoughts, making them obedient to Christ as soon as they enter our heads. Then we focus our attention on that which is excellent and praiseworthy—namely, the wonderful work God is doing in that person's life. To do this, we have to think before we speak. Because this is such a struggle for me, I often pray that the Holy Spirit would be the filter between my brain and my tongue.

When we have been sinned against, we have the option to retaliate with criticism, or cover it (or overwrite it) with love. Peter encourages us to do this: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Not only does love cover a multitude of sins, but forbearance through love has preventive benefits for all. Solomon said, "Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out" (Prov. 17:14). Forbearance nips a potential argument in the bud before it gets blown out of proportion. Historically, it is often the small battles that lead to war. The demonstration of forbearance rains peace on a potential battlefield before the armies ever rally to fight.

Another time when critical words spew from our lips is when things don't go our way, as with my Stinky State story at the beginning of this chapter. It's hard to voice encouraging words during not-so-ideal circumstances. How unimportant those circumstances

would seem if our minds were truly set on eternity! They would melt away in light of the truth spoken to us in Romans through the apostle Paul: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (8:18).

How I long to be more like Paul when faced with trying situations! Acts 16 details how Paul and Silas preached the gospel in Philippi until they were dragged away, beaten, and bound in stocks in the inner cell of the jail. Yet, every time Paul remembered the Philippians, he was thankful. Paul had been in the worst of situations in Philippi. He suffered beatings and insults (1 Thess. 2:2), yet he continued to speak words of encouragement. How was Paul thankful and encouraging after such devastating, hard times? He *chose* to be.

Paul *chose* not to ponder aspects of the situation that would lead to the temptation of being critical. Instead, he set his mind and heart on things above. He determined to live out of the mercies and grace of God toward his adversaries in spite of his horrific circumstances. He resolved to dwell on the love he had for Jesus and the love Jesus had for him. Therefore, he was able to live out of the hope of the gospel.

Critical words begin with critical thinking. Critical thinking begins with a heart that lacks thankfulness for the goodness of God. God is good all the time, no matter what evils are happening around us or what circumstances we are facing. When we dwell on God’s goodness during tough situations, it changes the way we view those situations and the way we handle them. Solomon encourages us not to search for the bad, but to seek out the good. He also indicates that there are consequences for both. “Whoever seeks good finds favor, but evil comes to one who searches for it” (Prov. 11:27). As sanctified children of God, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to take captive critical thoughts and words, to edify others through speaking encouragement, and to live thankfully in the goodness of God.