

**A story shows negative interpretations are like dirty glasses**

Thanks Ann, and thanks for your generosity! It allows us to bless local teachers in Jesus' name and be part of getting God's Word to some of the 200 million people without a single Bible verse in their language. Let's thank God for letting us be part of His kingdom work and ask for His help today...

Margot and David have been pretty happily married for 12 years, but they always have trouble making vacation and holiday plans. It's because Margot mistakenly believes that David dislikes her parents because of a few incidents early in their marriage. In reality, David, as husbands sometimes do, has long forgotten about those things. ☺ He's actually fond of his in-laws. But Margot's negative interpretation of David's feelings and motives always messes up their planning.

Back in 2019, Margot introduced the Christmas plans conversation by saying: "We should start looking into plane tickets to visit my parents for Christmas." David, thinking about their budget problem, replies, "I'm not sure we can afford it this year."

Margot, with her negative interpretation of David, responds, "My parents are very important to me, even if you don't like them. I'm going." David replies, "I'd like to go, really, I just don't see how we can afford plane tickets with Joey's braces bill."

Margot retorts, "You just can't admit that you don't want to go, can you? Be honest, you don't like my parents." Then David defensively says, "There's nothing to admit, I like your parents. I'm just concerned about our finances." Then Margot snaps, "That's a convenient excuse" as she storms out of the room.

That story is from *A Lasting Promise*, a very helpful Christian marriage book. It's by Christian researchers who studied decades of university research on couples and also themselves researched 135 couples for 12 straight years. In all this research, they found four destructive patterns. If one or more of these patterns persisted with frequency, they were strong predictors of a chronically unhappy marriage or even divorce.

We talked two weeks ago about one of those four patterns: the escalation ladder. Being the romantic I am ☺ we're spending Valentine's Day here talking about another destructive

pattern: negative interpretations. Negative interpretations are described in the book as when one person “consistently believes that the motives of the other are more negative than is really the case.” As we think about negative interpretations today, let’s focus first on ourselves and where we can grow, rather than on nudging the person next to us about their negative interpretations.

### **Relevance: We’re all vulnerable to negative interpretations**

Once you take on a negative interpretation, like Margot, it impacts what you see. I think of this with glasses. It’s like Margot has these dirty glasses on keeping her from seeing David clearly. Margot sees him through these glasses as, metaphorically, more dirty than he really is, with this negative interpretation that David’s motive is to avoid her family because he secretly hates them.

We’re all biased to see what we already believe to be true. You’re probably heard the term for that before, “confirmation bias.” So as Margot wears these dirty glasses, she’s unlikely to realize that she’s seeing things unfairly, ascribing to David a negative motive he doesn’t actually have.

The more of these negative interpretations that a marriage has, the more distressed it tends to become. As it becomes more distressed, the research shows an increasing tendency for each partner to even discount and not give credit for the positive things they see in their mate.<sup>1</sup>

Couples aren’t the only ones vulnerable to the dangers of these dirty glasses. You might be tempted to make a negative interpretation about the motives of someone here whose politics really differ from yours, especially if you’ve been exposing yourself to media encouraging negative interpretations of the other side.

Or you might be tempted to put on these dirty glasses with your co-worker who said something that felt a bit abrasive about COVID yesterday. Or tempted to make a negative interpretation about the motives of your friend who didn’t show up when you were supposed to hang out.

It’s already hard enough to find a way forward together when there’s disagreement and hurt feelings, and if you add these dirty glasses, it makes it so much harder. No one likes to be

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<sup>1</sup> Info from original (in *Introduction* and *Chapter 2*) and the revised (in *Chapter 2*) editions of *A Lasting Promise* by Stanley, et. al. I adjusted the wording of the Margot and David story.

accused of having more negative motives than they really do, especially if they're being falsely accused over and over.

### **Orienting to God's Word: What do we do when we're tempted to put on the dirty glasses?**

Thankfully, God's Word has help for when we're rushing to put on these dirty glasses. Help that can save us and those we love from so much pain and greatly impact the quality of our relationships over a lifetime.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 4, 1 Corinthians 4. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

1 Corinthians is written by Paul, a very important early church leader, to the early church in the city of Corinth. For a year, Paul ministered to the Corinthians, and after he left, other leaders like Peter and Apollos also spent time serving the Corinthian church.

Then Paul heard that the church was starting to divide over these leaders, that some preferred Paul, others Peter, others Apollos, and that these groups were dividing and making negative interpretations about the other leaders.

### **Teaching: Questions that help our response to this temptation**

*I might be wrong...* – So Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 4 to help the Corinthians with their dirty glasses. We'll start in verse 1: **(1-2)**

4 This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. <sup>2</sup> Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

These verses help everyone have the right mindset about the church leader they prefer and perhaps admire too much. That leader is just a servant of Jesus. Jesus is the one we're to unite around, not Paul, Peter, or Apollos, who are just servants entrusted with important ministry.

Starting in verse 3, Paul helps the Corinthians, and us, when we're tempted to make negative interpretations. To those making negative interpretations about Paul, or the other church leaders, Paul says this in verse 3: **(3-4)**

<sup>3</sup> I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

When it comes to judging other's motives, verse 3 shows that we might be wrong, our glasses might be dirty. People can be mistaken, which is why Paul cares very little if he's judged by other people, because they might be wrong.

Or to personalize it, I might be wrong about someone else. Let's all personally say "I might be wrong" together. Say it with me, "I might be wrong." Let's have some humility when interpreting other's motives. We don't know everything going on inside that other person and we might have biases keeping us from seeing clearly.

As Paul says in verse 4, we don't even fully know our own motives. Even if our conscience is clear, that doesn't guarantee that we're innocent. If we can be wrong about what's going on inside of us, we certainly can be wrong about another person's motives.

We could be wrong about the other person because we misinterpreted the other person's intention in a situation. Or because we don't yet realize that our expectations are unrealistic. Or because we're subtly excusing the part we played in the problem, as if they caused the whole mess, just to name a few of the many ways we could be wrong.

Only God is all good and all knowing, so only God always judges rightly, which is why Paul says in verse 5:

<sup>5</sup> Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

Verse 5 shows that only God knows all the motives of every heart and will expose them. So before we rush to put on the dirty glasses, let's first remind ourselves, "I might be wrong."

*so is there a more loving interpretation here?* – The Corinthians were wrong not only about their leaders, they also had negative interpretations about people's spiritual gifts. They mistakenly thought that people with what they considered the "better" spiritual gifts were more important and closer to God and didn't need those "less important" church members.

So Paul corrects their misconceptions on spiritual gifts in chapter 12 and then in chapter 13 invites them to a much better way of thinking about each other. So let's go to chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, starting in verse 4, to see this much better way. 1 Corinthians 13:4 says: **(4-7)**

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

God's Word has something much better for us than rushing to negative interpretations. His Word invites us to think about each other in loving ways, which includes being kind, as verse 4 says, kind in our interpretations of each other. And love also includes trusting and being hopeful, as verse 7 says, including in our interpretations of each other.

So when you're in a disagreement, and feeling hurt or angry, and want to rush to put on the dirty glasses, let's first step back and consider, "is there a more loving interpretation here?"

A loving interpretation could be choosing kindness, like verse 4 says. Thinking about your misbehaving child, "I wonder if they're hungry or had a hard day at school..." rather than jumping straight to thinking, "This child is purposefully disrespecting me."

Or a loving interpretation could look like starting with trust, like verse 7 says. Thinking, "Those words hurt, but I know my spouse loves me, so maybe I just misunderstood what they said. I should clarify." Rather than assuming right away that your spouse intended to hurt you.

Or a loving interpretation could look like having hope, like verse 7 says. Thinking, "I'm bummed my friend didn't show up like they promised. But I'm not sure why they didn't show, so I'm giving them the benefit of the doubt as long as I can."

Here on this day of love, why not start with love in all your relationships, asking "is there a more loving interpretation here?" If I'm looking at you with these clean glasses vs. looking at you with these dirty glasses, it makes a big difference in what I think I'm seeing, though I'm actually looking at the same person either way. Which glasses I choose will make a huge difference in how I see you and in the quality of our relationship.

*Am I being hypocritical?* – But what about when we look for a more loving interpretation and clarify things with the other person, only to find out that the other person did have negative motives?

Let's open to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 7, and get guidance for that difficult situation, Matthew chapter 7. In Matthew 7 Jesus gives us great wisdom on addressing someone else's sin. We'll start in verse 3, verse 3 says: **(3-4)**

<sup>3</sup>“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup>How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”

A couple of years ago, I got insight into this passage as the church building was being remodeled. One day, I hear a saw cutting some wood and soon after that a worker comes, tears just pouring out of one of his eyes, saying, “Jeff, help me with this splinter.”

So I tell him that's a senior pastor problem, go talk with Pastor Dave. I'm just kidding. ☺ After a moment of shock, I sit him down and point my cell phone light in his eye and have him move his eye around as I search for the speck of wood.

After a few intense minutes, I'm not seeing anything, and he's still in pain, so I rush down to get Jackie and Manuel to look in his eye, and they can't locate the speck either. So I rush to CVS down the street and get an eye flushing kit. After he uses it, his eye finally feels somewhat better. Then his boss returns to the church from an errand and takes him to an urgent care place to get it checked out.

Before this experience, I had never pieced together that when Jesus talks about helping someone with a speck of sin in their eye, this metaphor likely came from His experience in His dad's carpentry shop.

When that worker needed my help with the literal speck in his eye, I would have been of no use if I had a whole plank of wood in my own eye. Imagine, as I'm in pain and can't see through my plank, trying to help that worker with his speck.

So when someone sins against us, before confronting them about the speck of sin in their eye, Jesus invites us to step back and consider ourselves first.

To consider things like, “have I done the same wrong thing, or maybe even a worse version of what I'm now mad about with this other person?” If not, is there's another area of my life where I'm walking around with a plank of sin that I'm not even that worried about working on, while thinking this other person must work on their sin.

To summarize, Jesus invites us in these verses to consider “Am I being hypocritical?” before addressing the other person’s sin. Jesus clarifies this concern about hypocrisy further in verse 5. It says:

<sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

Jesus isn’t saying in these verses that we should never address another person’s sin. He’s saying before we do, let’s consider, “Am I being hypocritical?” If we’re honest, we’re all hypocrites to some degree. I’ve made plenty of negative interpretations not only of others, but even of Jesus’ motives, though He was literally dying to love me.

As we acknowledge our hypocrisy and work on our own sin issues, this puts us in a humbler, healthier place. So that when we address the other person’s sin against us, we can do so with some humility, as a fellow sinner also in desperate need of our Savior’s forgiveness and help.

It’s like the difference between me trying to help the worker with a judgmental attitude of, “well, you should have been using your safety goggles” versus trying to help with a humble attitude of, “Yeah, I’ve not always used the right safety procedures and equipment either.”

That second, more humble posture will increase the chances of the other person responding well to you and for apologies, forgiveness, and restoration to flow.

### **Next Step**

Now these two challenging questions, “I might be wrong, so is there a more loving interpretation here?” and “Am I being hypocritical?” can save your relationships a lot of heartache. As I thought about applying these questions, I thought of a story Pastor Dave once shared with me. I’ve asked him to share it with us over video.... [video]

Thank you, Pastor Dave and Kathy, for honestly sharing this real-life stuff, it’s so helpful for us. Maybe, like me, you can identify a bit with how Pastor Dave describes himself early in his marriage, with a negative interpretation, thinking Kathy was purposefully withholding praise out of negative motives.

Think about your close relationships: maybe your parents, siblings, significant other, children, mentor, friend. Is there something you've longed for one of them to provide, and they haven't provided it as much as you want, or at all.

In your understandable disappointment and pain, maybe you've made some negative interpretations of their motives. I've been there, done that, plenty of times. We're all in this struggle together. Perhaps this morning the Holy Spirit is inviting us to go on Pastor Dave's journey. To consider about that other person, "I might be wrong, so is there a more loving interpretation here?"

Pastor Dave pointed the way for us in his processing: Kathy is clearly showing her love for me in her many acts of service and kindness. Now that I think about it, she grew up with parents who mainly showed their love through service and kindness, not lots of verbal affirmation, so it's not surprising that she mostly expresses her love through acts of service and kindness. And over time I'm seeing her grow in affirmation.

So similarly, maybe that family member or friend of yours who hasn't provided something you want has more positive motives than you've believed, or at least less negative ones. So maybe you need to take off the dirty glasses, or at least clean off some of the dirt to see things more realistically. That other person can't do that for you; changing your negative interpretations is up to you and God.

And no matter what the motives are of that other person, it serves us well to consider, "Am I being hypocritical?" Like when a younger Pastor Dave realized that he was contributing to his own frustration by wanting an unrealistic level of praise. So similarly, maybe you, or I, am playing a negative part in a relational dynamic that we're frustrated about.

But even if we're totally innocent in a specific case, it can help to acknowledge that we're all being hypocritical to some degree. As Pastor Dave shared in the video that he's still very much a work in progress.

Maybe God has you here this morning to expose some things, because how you think about other's motives, especially when there's tension and conflict, has a lot to do with how your relationships will be in the years to come.

Instead of rushing to put on the dirty glasses, God invites you to first consider these two questions. That's our next step this morning, when tempted to put on the dirty glasses, first



consider, “I might be wrong, so is there a more loving interpretation here?” And “Am I being hypocritical?” Considering those two questions is our next step, our application.

Our decisions around the direction of our thinking, whether or not we start with negative interpretations, becomes a permanent part of the story of our lives. Let’s not rush to put on the dirty glasses, instead consider the two questions. Why would we want to rush to put on glasses that cause us to see our friends, family, and church family as dirty, as worse than they really are?

Think of what Pastor Dave and Kathy’s marriage would be like if Pastor Dave had held on to that negative interpretation for all these years, continuing to incorrectly think that Kathy was purposely withholding praise out of negative motives. Think of the negative impact that could build over 42 years from just that one negative interpretation.

These glasses are not leading to the life changing relationships this series is all about. They’re not leading to where Pastor Dave describes his marriage today, “both of us learning the grace of accepting and loving each other – just as we are.” So let’s pray that we not miss this blessing...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.