

Principles of Restoration

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“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted.” [Gal 6:1, RSV]

Restoration is a charge given to those “who are spiritual” as they work with those who are overtaken by transgression. Members who are spiritual, or spiritually mature, are “*those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*” Yet the command, for them, includes an appeal to gentleness and self-examination, suggesting the possibility of further temptation in themselves. What would that temptation be and how can they avoid it? The following principles are the answer to that question. Specifically, they are those principles which apply to the members of the ecclesia, instead of to those being restored. They anchor the restoration process to the Spirit of Christ. As such, the principles of restoration are more a basis of self-examination. In particular, they are principles that affect the heart in the contemplation of “mercy and truth.”

1) “Restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.”
[Gal 6:1]

Gentleness and humility are proven in the process of restoration.

Restoring carries with it a warning—“*lest you also fall into temptation.*” The temptation to hardness of heart results in a failure of the spirit of gentleness, which is a loss of the spirit of Christ. The test of hardness of heart is not a test that is exclusive to marriage. God proves us in many ways in His efforts to develop our characters. How many times has an ecclesia suffered a hard-hearted breach, which was triggered by a marital breach? The loss of mercy can oppose any restorative action taken by an ecclesia in the name of love. But the spirit of Christ as the Head should prevail as it holds us to the saving power of His sacrifice. He said, “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” (Mat 11:28-30) It may be that those who “labor” are the hard workers, and those who are “heavy laden” are those crushed with sin. How loving he was in his offer of deliverance to all. There was never any shunning or condemnation from him. He fed the ungrateful and healed the ignorant. He ate with gluttons, drunkards, and sinners, and even broke bread with his betrayer. All the thief on the cross had to do was ask, and he became the first of all those to be saved by Christ. He died knowing he had been forgiven. Restoration requires a spirit of gentleness.

2) I will be a swift witness against those...that turn aside the stranger from his right.” (Mal 3:5)

People have an individual right to make a peace offering with God.

Along with adulterers, sorcerers, deceivers, and oppressors the Lord told Malachi that He would be a swift witness against yet one more type of betrayal of righteousness: Those that turn aside the stranger from his right. And what was the right of a stranger? In the Law, that right is described in Leviticus 7,

Exodus 12, and Numbers 15, (primarily the latter.) The right of the stranger concerned the use of one law providing atonement for sin.

“As the sin offering is, so is the trespass offering: there is one law for them: the priest that maketh atonement therewith shall have it. (Lev 7:7)

“One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you. (Exo 12:49)” The observance of this law was the specific *right* of the stranger.

In Numbers 15, *one law*—grain and wine for a peace offering—was the common right of everyone in the house of Jacob, and also of circumcised sojourners. There would be *one law*, and it would be a person’s *right* to observe it. For anyone in Israel to turn aside that right, was to block an individual’s effort to approach the throne of grace, and so to interrupt the personal process of repentance offered by God directly to all men. Behind the law there is the principle that sin and judgment are ultimately between God and the individual who seeks him. On that principle, we “*examine ourselves*,” we “*work out our own salvation*,” and we “*judge nothing before the time*.” In broad matters of fellowship, we are commanded to be “*submissive*,” “*of one mind*,” and to “*have no fellowship with darkness*.” To practice otherwise creates disparity and disorder. But in the narrow context of personal atonement for sin, where judgment is to be avoided, and where the *degree of repentance is left to God*, the right to return to God is retained. If the ecclesia doesn’t make an allowance for an individual’s own right to make peace with God, when repentance is recognized, it presumes too much authority. Only the Lord can look upon the heart, and the judgments of Christ will be with righteousness and equity.

3) “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup”. [1 Cor 11:28]

On the condition of expressed repentance, the ecclesia should let an individual make peace with God. It is their right.

Paul seems to be cognizant of the principle of *one law* upholding the right of circumcised (or baptized) individuals to atone for sin with the peace offering of bread and wine. He makes two commands, where there may be a question. 1) “*But let a man examine himself*, and 2) *let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup*.” If the whole of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is taken together, this command, in chapter 11, makes a clear summary concerning the Table of the Lord, accounting for the context of his advice in Chapter 5. He had said of the *justifier* of sin, to “drive that person from among you.” But of the *confessor* of sin, in Chapter 11, he concludes with a command not to turn aside the right to express personal repentance, with the assurance that do to otherwise does not implicate the ecclesia. The person otherwise eats and drinks “*condemnation to himself*.” It will be only in the future, when the Word of God judges us all, that we will know who ate and drank unworthily. Until then, confession, and the commitment to change, brings each of us to the altar, where we are chastised with the question, “Was the cross sufficient for me?” If it was, then the restoration of one, restores us all.

4) “Blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.” [Exo 32:32]

The spirit of Christ involves a willingness to die in the place of the sinner.

Moses was a type of Christ. His spirit manifested unparalleled meekness, above all other men. In the same way that Christ was willing to die so that we might live, Moses offered himself to save the children of Israel. He had received the Laws of God, only to return and find the people naked and fallen to idolatry. On the pronouncement of God’s judgment, Moses immediately seeks a means of atonement.

He says, “Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.” Moses was actually willing to forfeit his own salvation in order to save an ignorant, unrepentant people! David also was a type of Christ. When David heard that Absalom had died, he exclaimed, “*O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!*” (2 Sam 18:33) He knew his own sin was being visited upon Absalom and he took the accountability for his own sin as it was related to his son. In the same way, the Lord took accountability for his own flesh, and instead of condemning the world, he condemned sin, as it was in his flesh. So he became the representative of the whole human race, dying as an acceptable, unblemished sacrifice, so that we through him would have access to the throne of Grace. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8) The pattern is this: in each circumstance, a personal sacrifice was offered even without requiring repentance of the individuals. If these righteous souls were willing to offer themselves to atone for the yet unrepentant sins of others, how much more should we be willing to provide a place at the altar for repentant hearts. Would you offer yourself in order to save another who is unworthy? That is the spirit of Christ.

5) “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day” [Mat 20:11]

If God is generous with salvation, we shouldn't resent it.

The workers who had labored all day resented the same wage paid to the eleventh hour servants. Obedient servants know who they are. They know the time and effort they have invested, and they hope in their reward. But the human sense of equity can be thrown off center when the reward for “not much” is exactly the same as the reward for “a lot.” Jesus knew we would be tempted to think that God isn't fair, if He gives the same reward to less obedient people, whether by time or by effort. The same feeling can tempt us to resentment in the time of restoration, but the thought is in a slightly different form. Specifically, it is a resentment of the offer of the same reward for those who seem to pay a lower price for their salvation. For this reasoning the Master is swift and concise with his reproof. He asks, “*Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?*” (Mat 20:15) If it is true that God's judgments are his alone, and we receive as he wills, then we have no business questioning the status of others around us, even if it appears that they have offered less for their salvation, or gotten away with more. To inhibit restoration with a false sense of equity imposes too much on repentance and assumes an understanding of fairness that can only belong to God. There will be no mistakes at the Judgment seat of Christ.

6) Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; [Mat 18:10]

Restored individuals are more important than regular attendees.

How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish. (Mat 18:12-14) This point is as clear as it gets in Jesus' own words. The shepherd who feeds himself, while avoiding the lost sheep is not a Shepherd like Christ. Restoration seeks that which was lost, brings back that which was driven away, and binds those broken by sin. The “binding” is the strength of covering that comes from atonement.

7) “and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.” [Mat 18:28]

In matters of repentance and forgiveness, paying back is not the issue.

It was the wicked servant who ruled with force and cruelty, incarcerating the debtor “*till he should pay the debt.*” But the good shepherd teaches that when a man has fallen into a debt and the debt is forgiven, it does not need to be repaid. Forgiveness obviates debt. In the same way, the operation of mercy in the forgiveness of sin provides a clean slate, upon which a new life is written. The Lord’s Prayer says the same in the plea “*forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*” So when a remarriage occurs, the idea of paying back the debt in the dissolution of a marriage is the same as a demand to give back what was taken. In Deuteronomy 24:10, the law had a provision of mercy that required a **creditor** to give back what had just been repaid to him, “*that he [the debtor] may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the LORD your God.*” In other words, forgiveness included letting the debtor keep what was owed. The spirit of this law, and others like it, is the same as the spirit in Matthew 18—mercy. To bind someone to an unreasonable, hurtful reversal of conditions is hard hearted, and unfruitful. Were God to do that with us, we would never make up the debt. In the context of restoration, The Lord asks, “*Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?*” He then says, “*So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.*”

8) “these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment:”
[Luke 15:11-32]

The prodigal son’s older brother shouldn’t have taken it personally, despising the joy.

It was wrong for the older brother to complain, even though his complaint was on the basis of his own obedience. His problem was that he was resentful of the father’s mercy, because he was too bound up in selfish comparison. For him to feel angry about his brother’s return and his father’s joy, was unrighteous envy and hardness of heart. His frame of reference was wrong. It wasn’t about *his obedience*; it was about the father’s *mercy*—and only about that! For the obedient son to boycott his father’s, joyful feast, was common jealousy. What constituted his brother’s repentance were his confession and a broken spirit. He said he had sinned against heaven and against his father, and that he was unworthy of his title as son. The story doesn’t dispute his unworthiness. Yet his father was immediately glad that he had returned. Celebration was appropriate. Forgiveness was easy. Why should we feel any different? If there is indeed joy in heaven in the moment when failure is turned again to faith, there should be joy in the ecclesia. It is not the spirit of Christ to feel indignant at the return of a sinner, saying “*the Lord is not equal.*” Restoration makes no place for obedience-centered anger and jealousy.

9) “neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: [Deu 24:16]

It is wrong to punish the children for the father’s sin.

Although God said he would visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, the Law says it is wrong for us. The principle of this law is that *a person is punished for his own sin.* Yet under Christ, we are to punish no one for sin. Our charge is to use God’s word and goodness to lead people to repentance. For the family of Achan to be burned along with him, means that they had somehow conspired together in his sin, and were all punished alike for a mutually shared sin. If an unreasonable demand for a certain kind of repentance imposes punishment on a child for the sins of their parents, the demand is wrong. For an ecclesia to insist upon breaking the second home in order to reverse the breach of the first is also wrong. To impose further dissolution ignores the spirit of this Law and is lacking in mercy on the

children. If the object of marital repentance is “*Godly seed*,” then the situation, which is most likely to foster faith in the children, is the preferred solution. Restoration considers the faith of the children *first*.

10) “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” [Mat 7:2]

Judgment will be without mercy to those who show no mercy. [James 2:13]

It’s simple and clear. We will be judged with the judgment we make. And if we limit the measure of our mercy, it will be limited with us. There is no yes and no with God, but in Christ “*it is always yes!* [2 Cor 1:19,20] The reason for this is that although every man is unfaithful, *God is still faithful and Christ will judge all things when he comes*. Jesus’ command about judgment is clear to the point of bluntness. James says as much when he warns us that *no mercy will be shown to those who show no mercy*. Judgment belongs to God, and will be made by His word in the future. For now, we all have time to repent, and that is how the grace of Christ operates: “*God’s kindness [patience and forbearance] is meant to lead us to repentance.*” (Rom 2:4) Restoration that encourages a repentant spirit refrains from judgment.

ON “PUTTING AWAY”

11) “Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife” [Deu 24:4]

Putting a spouse away is always wrong; but switching back is an “abomination.”

The context of the law in Deut 24:1-4 shows that it was an *abomination* for a man to remarry the woman who was his original wife, after he put her away and she was subsequently put away by the second husband. He was not to attempt to restore the original covenant. “*for that is abomination before the LORD.*” (v.4) This principle shows that the original covenant was dissolved by the divorce. Who should be with whom is a secondary issue. The primary issue, and God’s uniform appeal, is to *return to Him*. The error of the heart is to desire the breach, or to justify the sin. Jeremiah and Malachi passionately advocate this principle. Jeremiah says: “*They say, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man’s, shall he return unto her again? Shall not that land be greatly polluted? But thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, saith the LORD.*” (Jer 3:1) The land was “greatly polluted” because unfaithfulness was repeated. When a man puts away his wife, or when he seeks her again after she has been put away a second time, the effect is increasing moral pollution. God’s appeal seems to be against the breach *for any cause*. In other words, *both* the first and the second divorces are wrong. Expressed conversely, the principle for repentance seems to make an absolute command: *stay married*. It is wrong to divorce, and it is wrong to go back. In the first instance, the divorce nullifies the spirit of Christ. In the second instance, it continues a process of adulterous *switching*. Jeremiah teaches that the *switching itself* is the harlotry. In the context of Israel’s unfaithfulness, Malachi makes the same appeal for God, saying, “*Return unto me, and I will return unto you.*” Returning to God means *putting and end to switching*, as it begins the practice of faithfulness. This is the goal of restoration.

12) “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”

[Mat 19:5-6]

Divorce is never the solution because it is always caused by hardness of heart.

It was Pharisaic legalism that framed the question, “*Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?*” In other words, they thought they could hang Jesus on a point of controversy that would either show him to be too loose or too tight on the Law. If he were to specify certain exceptions where divorce is allowed, they could entangle him in the intricacies of their traditions. If he were to deny divorce in any circumstance, they could build a case against him for contradicting the Law. Incising both their assumption and their motive, Jesus went to the origin of marriage when he answered, “*they twain shall be one flesh.*” He then creates an absolute command. He says, “*What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*” Since no man can say *who* God puts together, no man should ever put asunder. On principle, the Lord’s answer was, in effect, not for any cause. The authority of God had to supersede the Authority of Moses, and the mercy of God ruled over the judgments of Moses. Jesus also taught that hardness of heart is at the root of divorce. Therefore on all levels, in any situation, where mercy prevails, divorce will not occur. If there were a righteous exception, Jesus would have been bound by wisdom to cite it. If the only way to cure an unrighteous remarriage is to dissolve it, why didn’t the Lord take this opportunity to say so? He was quick to point out an exception to adultery, but he was absolute about not putting away. There is *no cause* worth the damage of a dissolved marriage, or the loss of mercy, because in every case, it spawns further adultery. In other words, it only makes things worse. It follows, therefore, that it is wrong to press for the dissolution of a remarriage, even if the commandments of Christ show the marriage to have come from sin. Otherwise, David would have been commanded to put Bathsheba away. For an ecclesia to require hardness of heart in a person who is trying to repent from it puts them in an impossible conflict. Repentance requires a renewal of mind, reflected in behavior that *permanently installs faithfulness from the point of their repentance*.

Ezra’s Priests

For his own reasons, Jesus left out the example of the priests of Ezra’s time, who put away their wives and children in their noble effort to restore the law. The issue was one of being married to the daughters of a strange God. It was not the undoing of a remarriage after divorce, although it could be argued that it was the dissolution of an unrighteous marriage. There are two points to consider in connection with the record of this amazing situation. The first is that, were an ecclesia to attempt to put this principle to practice, every member who is not *married in the Lord* would be required to put away his or her unbelieving spouse. The Ecclesial Guide suggests a restrained approach to this question. (*Norfolk Constitution, Ecclesial Guide, section 45, paragraph 4.*) The second is that the law of Christ pertaining to unbelieving spouses changed in order to allow for their conversion. It is the spirit of Christ to bring all to repentance. Recommending the dissolution of marriage only discourages repentance, and we are not to call unclean those whom God would cleanse. Grace allows the time.

13) “For the LORD, ...hateth putting away:” Mal 2:16

If God hates putting away, He hates it because of its effect on the faith of children.

If it is true that God hates putting away, then there is no spiritual justification for divorce based on any situational ethic. Putting away a spouse requires hardness of heart, and the loss of practical mercy is always the issue. The reason God says He hates divorce is twofold. In Malachi 2, the prophet’s underlying principle

is opened by the question, “Have we not all one Father?” Marrying the daughter of a strange God, violence and anger in the home, or covert relationships leading to adultery and divorce, all subvert the understanding that children develop of *one Father*. Children are meant to learn about their relationship to God from their relationship to their natural father. If their father on earth is unfaithful, how will the children learn that their Father in heaven is faithful? If daddy believes in a different God, they are raised in the dichotomy of two fathers. If he is covert, violent or absent, the upbringing embeds a distortion of a father who should otherwise be true, gentle, and present in the home. In all circumstances where one father is lost, Godly seed are discouraged, and the sin is visited to the third and fourth generation. In simple terms, the faith of the children can be ruined by divorce. For restoration to be effective, even in the aftermath of past failure, the parents must restore the patterns of righteousness meant for a family, where now divorce is unthinkable, and where a parent *never leaves again*.

14) “If thou have no delight in her, then thou shalt let her go.” [Deu 21:11-14]

The provision for putting away a captive woman meant that the covenant was not irreversible.

In the times of the law, when a woman was taken in conquest and a man desired to marry her, she was consoled for a month and then became his wife. After the marriage, if he found no favor in her, the law commanded him to put her away. The English wording in this law is slightly different from the Hebrew. The text simply says he should “*let her go*.” But the original word for “go” is *shalach*, or to “*put away*.” When Malachi says “*the Lord hates putting away*,” in Mal 2:16, the Hebrew is the same. So, if God hates “putting away,” why does he command the soldier to “put away” his captive wife, finding no delight in her? The only scriptural answer that can be applied to this is the answer given by Jesus, when he said that Moses allowed divorce because of “*hardness of your heart*,” but the law of God is always the same, “*let not man put asunder*.” The man’s heart was hardened, but the law nevertheless showed mercy for her by letting her go. In other words, the law imposed mercy when it failed in the spouse. This is a clear example of how the principle, “*mercy triumphs over judgment*” operates in practice. It is another example of a marriage covenant voided by the hardness of man’s heart on one hand; yet also mercifully dissolved, on the other.