

THE BONDS DECEPTION

*Breaking the Bonds of Self Deception
D.O.T.W.*

Living in a world that scorns biblical values, it's easy to rationalize behavior unacceptable to God. But Christians who reject the admonitions of God's Word sell themselves into the slavery of self-deception.

Jesus wants to break the bonds of deceit that compel believers to justify their sinful behavior. And we can be instruments of His liberating love—if we will confront hypocrisy in ourselves and others.

Destructive Deception

John, an associate pastor in one of California's leading charismatic churches, was at the peak of his ministry. He was a well-educated man with years of experience on the mission field. And he was the protégé of a leading radio minister who had invested many hours in him.

Nevertheless, one day as we sat together in my office, John cataloged all the reasons he was leaving his wife and newborn daughter. "After all," he exclaimed, "divorce is not the unpardonable sin!"

John had become entangled in an

adulterous relationship within the very church group he was leading. What troubled me most, however, was how easily he managed to justify his behavior.

God's Word says: "To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17, NKJV). Certainly we're all sinners who need God's grace and forgiveness. But when, like John, we know what God expects and still refuse to do it, we're in rebellion.

God likens such rebellion to witchcraft because it circumvents His will and replaces it with our own (see 1 Sam. 15:23). Rebellion is actually self-worship. And when we make excuses for our rebellion, we give birth to self-deception.

Why does rebellion lead to deception? When we allow excuses to override the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, our conscience hurts, and we try to pacify it. But just like physical pain, the pain of conscience is telling us something has gone awry. So ignoring or suppressing the pain is dangerous.

The result may be emotional or even physical difficulties. King David, for example, noted that when he refused to

acknowledge his sin, his "body wasted away," his "vitality was drained away" and he was "groaning all day long" (Ps. 32:3-4). Our spiritual health may suffer as well, as David also discovered: "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (Ps. 66:18).

Meanwhile, the tragedy of self-deception extends beyond our personal lives. Because deception robs us of our victory over sin, it leaves us with little to offer a needy world. And our hypocrisy only fuels the malevolence of secular society toward the church. So we can't afford to compromise biblical truth in ourselves or others.

When we alter God's Word to fit our own selfish lifestyle, we deceive ourselves. It's a process of rationalizing away what we know to be true.

Several months ago, for example, I received a call from a friend in the Midwest. Her husband, a graduate of a leading Christian university, was carrying on an adulterous affair with a married woman. How could this happen, she wondered, with someone who knows so much biblical truth?

After an hour on the phone, the subtle roots of this sin became clear. Nearly a year before, they innocently had subscribed to a cable television service. Before long, however, they began staying up late at night after their children went to bed so they could watch X-rated movies together.

I asked her, "How did you justify it?"

"At first I felt bad," she said. "Then I thought it might help our sex life."

What it actually did, of course, was to create an unrealistic fantasy in her husband's heart. Now that act of self-deception was destroying their marriage.

The Path to Freedom

How do we avoid self-deception? Like David, we must pray: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me" (Ps. 139:23-24). But we must do more than pray.

Too often we try to reduce the process of personal repentance and restoration to a silent confession. But little or no outward change accompanies our words. We repeat innocuous prayers that yield the same stagnant results.

We may find solace in the truth that

God "understands" us, even when we have no victory over our sin. But we must realize that how we treat our sin determines how prone we are to deception. We can choose one of two roads.

The pathway to freedom begins when we acknowledge our sin. Then we must confess it to God, make restitution and repent—that is, turn away

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from our wrongdoing. This process of restoration involves a moral and spiritual realignment that produces growth and character.

When we try to sidestep such an essential process, we turn onto the road of self-deception, a road lined with partial truths and filled with unsuspecting, undiscerning travelers. This path begins in disobedience and leads to a pattern of rebellion. Then, as we have seen, rebellion gives birth to deception—and, if left unchecked, deception eventually ends in reprobation.

Confrontation: Key to Wholeness

To avoid the tragedy of self-deception, we must allow the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts, and we must repent quickly of any sin He uncovers there. But beyond that process lies yet another challenge: We must learn to confront self-deception in others, as well.

God alone, in cooperation with the human will, can transform the human heart. We ourselves can't change people, nor can we even force them to see the truth. So we must recognize from the outset that confronting error in another person will sometimes produce change and other times cause resentment and even separation.

That means we open ourselves to hurt and rejection when we challenge someone's sin, however lovingly we may do it. So we're often unwilling to confront

because we don't want to be rejected. Or we may be reluctant to confront someone because we have sin in our own lives, and we don't want to be hypocrites.

Nevertheless, if we fail to challenge self-deception in others, we have failed to fulfill our duty within the body of Christ. When we refuse to face sin in others, I believe their sin becomes ours. We are our brother's keeper. True love requires that we care about one another's spiritual well-being.

Setting the Stage

To set the stage for a loving and effective confrontation with someone who we believe needs to face up to his or her sin, consider these 10 steps:

1. *Deal with sinful behavior early.* The longer it continues, the more damage it may do to the sinner and others.

2. *Make sure you have accurate information* about the offense.

3. *Examine your own heart* before you approach the other person. Run a "diagnostic check" of your own motives. Are you doing it just to "set the record straight"? Do you have bitterness or envy in your heart toward the person?

4. *Prepare your heart through prayer.* Queen Esther prepared her heart through both prayer and fasting before she approached the king on a difficult matter (Esth. 4:16). By the time she delivered her appeal, her heart was ready.

5. Be sure that you *know the truth* about what's right and wrong. Don't be vague; state clearly what you believe is the biblical view of the situation, and be ready to back up what you say with specific scriptures.

6. *Select the right time.* Again, Esther provides a good example for us. She knew how much was at stake, so she patiently waited and planned the conversation for the right moment.

7. *Choose the location carefully.* Select a spot where noise is minimal. Go to a park or a quiet restaurant.

8. *Use discretion* in discussing the meeting ahead of time. If the other person knows you're planning a confrontation, he or she may grow defensive or refuse to meet with you. If pressured about the purpose of the meeting, say: "There's something that's been on my heart. Can I share it with you?"

9. *Meet one-on-one.* Otherwise the



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person may feel "ganged up on." But there are exceptions to this rule: If someone hasn't been responsive after a first meeting, take another believer with you. If you fear for your physical safety, do the same.

10. Approach a fellow believer in the name of the Lord. It's God's honor and His law that have been violated.

The Encounter

By the time you have set the stage in this way, you should have invested time in thought, prayer and perhaps fasting. You may have done some house-cleaning of your own. And you may even be getting "cold feet" about the whole idea.

No doubt it's always easier in the short term to do nothing. You could presume that it's all "up to God." This is a normal reaction, but forge ahead.

Here are some tips for the meeting itself:

- **Be positive.** Let the person know you value his or her fine qualities.
- **Be patient.** It's never easy to stand against sin, nor should it be. Be natural and pleasant as you start your conversation.
- **Control your body language** to convey the right message. Body language is powerful. You'll be tense. So try to relax, and let your face show it. Sit straight and avoid fidgeting. Maintain eye contact.

● **Remain in control** of the conversation. Preface your comments with a statement like this: "I have something very important to share with you. It's hard for me, so I would appreciate the chance to complete my thoughts."

● **Remember that the rebuke should come from God through you.** If you keep the right spirit, you'll get this point across.

● **Express God's displeasure, not your personal rejection.** This isn't an attack on the value or character of the person you're talking to, but rather an evaluation of a particular behavior.

● **Be specific.** Don't assume that the other person knows what you mean.

● **Be gentle and humble.** You still have to stand tough. But there's nothing more disarming than someone who approaches us in a spirit of loving humility.

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When to Expose Sin

Self-deception, we've said, often results from persistent disobedience to God's will. So we shouldn't be surprised that at times we may have to go beyond our initial responsibility of confronting the sinner. Other steps can be taken if we enter a defiant attitude, such as a later meeting with another believer present.

In some circumstances, if the sinful behavior continues, we expose the sin to a local church body in order to preserve the health of the church. The apostle Paul told the Ephesians: "Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even *expose* them" (Eph. 5:11, emphasis added).

Typically we excuse ourselves from the uncomfortable task of dealing with sin in our churches. We may say of those who are sinning: "It's better to let them continue in their sin until they're more mature and can handle a rebuke."

Another excuse is that we fear we may drive them away from church. So we reason that it's better to have them in the church than "in the world." But if mere exposure to truth always led to obedience, Lucifer would never have rebelled against God!

To expose sin is a solemn task, and to do it incorrectly or with wrong motives is a serious matter. We must not go around looking for problems in every believer's life.

Even so, when Christians are walking in rebellion against God's Word, we have a duty to approach them. If we refuse to face ungodly behavior early, we give self-deception fertile ground to flourish. Paul told us we should be "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

When our words are rejected, we may feel like a failure. But we must remember that God desires, even more than we do, to bring restoration to our loved ones and friends. As we are faithful to fulfill our responsibility, we must trust the Holy Spirit to be faithful in His.

Jesus said it's the Spirit who convicts people of sin (John 16:8). Once we've done all we can, we must let Him do all He will. ■

Don Otis is president of Creative Ministry Resource. He has scaled mountains—including the Matterhorn in Switzerland—on three continents.



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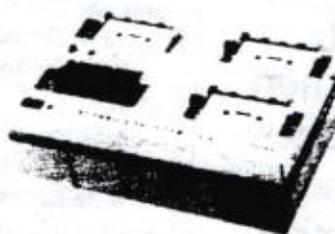
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