

HOSTILITY -- A VICIOUS CIRCLE

David Shutes
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Note: This is a translation into English of a document written in French. It has "grown" over a period of time, since 1986, and I have used it extensively both in Christian counseling and in teaching since that time. I am much more familiar with the terminology for these things in French than I am in English. If someone has any suggestions or corrections on the text, that will make it more readable or easier to understand, I would be very glad to hear from you.

INTRODUCTION

The "vicious circle of hostility" diagram attempts to explain a mechanism that provokes more difficulties in personal relationships than any other factor. Understanding this mechanism will help us to better understand (in a theoretical way, at least) how we can break this circle. That, in turn, will enable us to build up more satisfying personal relationships, or rebuild those relationships marked by tension.

The whole mechanism is rooted in the problem that I call *inferiority*, that is, feelings of inadequacy where our personal worth is concerned. Breaking the vicious circle of hostility thus requires us to know, first of all, how to overcome (more or less) our own feelings of inferiority. It would be useful, then, before proceeding farther, to review the main points of this problem, and its solution.

Overcoming inferiority

Feelings of inferiority are innate in man, because of sin. We were made to live in fellowship with God, and thus to participate in the infinite greatness that can be known only in God. But since sin is the refusal of God Himself, man separated himself from true greatness by his choice to turn from God. The result is that man is left only with his own personal value. To be sure, it would be wrong to think that man, on his own, has no worth. Nevertheless, our innate worth is quite insufficient for making up the glory that is lost by sin, the glory of God Himself. And on top of that, sinful man has even lost a lot of what he himself was, before sin.

Usually, we try to remedy this problem by our own efforts, by the worth that comes from being appreciated and admired by others, and so on. All such attempts end in failure. How can man, by his own abilities, make up for a lack of "greatness" that comes from having turned from the infinite glory of God? When we try to give ourselves worth by our own efforts, when we try to prove that we are "someone", we are acting according to the very nature of sin: We are trying to take charge of our own selves, instead of living under the care and direction of God.

This is true for Christians also. There is often a great temptation to want to think that we are "a cut above", that we have more worth than lost sinners. This is false. We are not worth more than the unsaved, and we are not better than they are. We should not think that God's love for us somehow shows that we have worth in ourselves. That would come down to saying (in a subtle way, at least) that God's favor is deserved, which would totally contradict the principle of grace.

It is true that the real worth of every human being comes from the fact of being loved by God, but that love is unconditional. We are loved because of who God is, not because of who we are. In reality, every human being is loved by God as much as every other one: "For God so loved the world...." He paid a very high price to save everyone. Not that everyone is saved because of that, but the Bible teaches very clearly that the price is paid for everyone, at least (see I Jn. 2:2).

God's love for us thus means that we have infinite worth. Already, now, without the slightest need to acquire it or prove it. As we understand that, we overcome our feelings of inferiority. How can someone who is conscious of having infinite worth feel small and insufficient?

And yet, there is a subtle but important trap in this. We must always be careful to remember that our value is in God, and not in ourselves. Our "infinite value" is what we are worth to Him, because He loves us, and not because there is some quality in us that gives us worth. If we try to think of ourselves as having worth in ourselves, even because of God (whether it be because of His love for us, or the fact that He created us, or whatever), then in a subtle way we are still acting according to the sin principle. We are still trying to be "whole", in and of ourselves, when in fact man can be whole only when he is in Christ.

Even as Christians, we are not sufficient unto ourselves. Our worth is in God, and the principle of Ps. 34:5 is very important here: "Those who look to Him are radiant." The believer who deals properly with the problem of inferiority is the one who is preoccupied with God, and not with his own self. We have infinite worth to God (even if we don't know it), but it is only when we are caught up in Him that we can take advantage of it. (Paradoxically, it is also in that frame of mind that we are the least aware of our own worth,

just because our thoughts are on God. Nevertheless, the problem is taken care of, at least for the moment, which is what really matters.)

The driving force behind the whole mechanism of the vicious circle of hostility is the failure to understand these things. To the extent that we try to defend our innate self-worth, we are living according to the flesh, and will act precisely in the ways that this diagram describes. We will see various ways to overcome this vicious circle, but without exception, they will always require that our own problem of inferiority be dealt with first of all, to a certain extent at least. As long as someone is caught up in this (ultimately impossible) attempt to establish and defend his own self-worth, he will inevitably react according to the principles of the vicious circle of hostility, each time he feels attacked.

Concerning the presentation

The overall diagram, with each aspect of the problem and of the possible solutions, is quite complex. This complexity is unavoidable, because personal relationships are complex. Any pretense that the mechanisms of such relationships can be faithfully and meaningfully represented by a simple diagram would be too simplistic an approach. And a simplistic approach would not help us much, because it would not go very far in enabling us to understand the true motivations behind our behavior.

In order to understand this complex mechanism, we will build it up a little at a time. The eight diagrams at the end of this document will build on each other successively, each one adding more aspects of the overall mechanism. I recommend follow on the diagrams, step by step, the principles that the text explains. In this way, the overall diagram (figure 9, the last one) should, little by little, become useful and understandable.

THE MECHANISM OF MUTUAL HOSTILITY

Reestablishing our worth when we are attacked

Figure 1 shows a logical chain, but does not necessarily represent a chronological series. Several of the steps in the diagram normally happen more or less simultaneously. They are shown as successive steps in the diagram only in order to break down into its logical parts our normal reaction when we are attacked, in order to understand the reasoning behind that reaction.

We should realize that this reasoning is almost never actually thought out. It would be entirely false to think that a normal person ever consciously chooses this line of reasoning. Nevertheless, understanding the steps that are explicitly separated out here will help us to understand the pretty much spontaneous reaction any of us will have in such a situation. After all, there are reasons even for a "spontaneous" reaction.

We need to begin with the concept of divine love, the deepest sense that the Bible gives to the word. Loving in this way means not only desiring, but actively seeking, the well-being of others. Loving means understanding that the well-being of others is at least as important as our own well-being, if not more so.

Thus, a person who is not motivated by love in this sense will not act in such a way as to produce good for others. The actions of "the one who does not love" (to use the famous expression from I Jn. 4:8, even though we are not dealing at all with the subject that the phrase refers to in its context) will therefore, fairly often, be ill-intentioned.

So that we know what we're talking about, it should be clarified that an ill-intentioned action is an action whereby someone seeks his own well-being at someone else's expense. The mere fact of seeking to be happy is not in itself ill-intentioned. It is when we know that our action will somehow hurt someone else that it is ill-intentioned. It should also be understood that everything that someone else finds disagreeable does not necessarily hurt him (or her). Very often, there is some pain involved in bringing about good. When my dentist pulls out a tooth, for example, that hurts. Nevertheless, his final goal is my good, and his action is in no way ill-intentioned. An action can be called ill-intentioned only when it is going to hurt someone else overall, in order to bring pleasure to the person who does it.

If I am the victim of an ill-intentioned action, I normally won't appreciate it. There is nothing surprising or hard to understand about that. It's just the way we're made.

It is more important to understand **why** I don't appreciate it. It is not simply the fact that I find the situation painful. I find what my dentist does to me painful, too, but in a certain sense I appreciate it. (At least enough that I actually pay him to do it!) There are even situations that are to our liking, but which we still don't

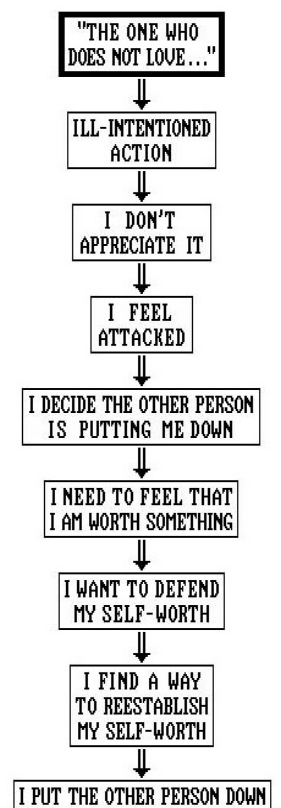


FIGURE 1

appreciate. If I feel obligated to visit someone who isn't very nice, for example, and the person makes it very clear that he or she does not wish to see me ever again, that actually goes along with what I want, since I didn't want to see them anyway. Nevertheless, I will almost certainly be put off somehow by the person's attitude.

What is bothersome, in all such situations, is not so much the fact of a "painful experience", not whether the action is useful to me or not at the time, but the attack on my person which it implies. If we think about it, it is a personal attack that I dislike the most, even more than any particular pain involved. If I put up with a visit to the dentist (more or less...), it is because I know that he is not attacking me in any way, even though he causes me momentary physical pain. And if I am bothered by the obnoxious person who no longer wants to see me, even though that is exactly what I wish, it is because I feel attacked. It is this attack that bothers me, more than any pain associated with the thing.

Personal attacks come in many, many forms. They can vary from extremely blatant actions (like a punch in the nose) to extremely subtle actions (like someone who doesn't say hello to us when we think they should). There are pretty much limitless varieties of ways to attack someone. Basically everything that annoys us in one way or another is a kind of attack, even if we only identify the irritation in a very vague kind of way.

What bothers me in an attack is that I realize that the other person is putting me down, that in one way or another he does not hold me in very much esteem. His lack of consideration may be very subtle, but it troubles me even so.

And since I have an innate problem in this area, I must react to such attacks on my self-worth. I have a deep (and valid) need to feel that I am someone worthwhile, someone who has a right to exist.

Since I cannot accept being put down, because that attacks my personal worth directly, I need to defend my worth. In one way or another, I need to prove that I am someone, and show that the person who attacked me has no right to act that way.

Thus, I need to find a way to reestablish my self-worth. But we need not suppose that that means I will spend any particular time thinking about it. Very often, our reaction is more or less instantaneous. Everyone has his habits, his usual "defense mechanisms". Some people will spend a fair amount of time wondering, "What can I do to get back at him?", but usually the reaction is immediate: "Idiot!" "You, too!"

The goal in all this is to sort of "tip the scales back our way", where relative worth is concerned. If I feel that someone has somehow set himself up over me, tried to make himself better than me, then I will need to "put him in his place". I will put him back down at what seems an appropriate level. Usually, that will mean "less than me". The proof that he is less than I am, after all, is in the very fact that he attacked me. For this reason, there is a very clear tendency in this reaction to "up the stakes", that is, to respond in a way that will more than pay back the implied insult. That way (so the reasoning goes), the person will not only see that he was wrong to think himself better than I am, but will see that he is actually less.

The means by which this is done varies enormously, according to our temperaments, our situations, and our convictions. A very direct and brutal way to put someone back in his place might be to punch him out then and there. But if we don't want to go at it so openly, there are plenty of other ways to respond, many of them not nearly so violent. Insults and anger are also violent reactions, but the violence is much more subtle. You can also put the other person in his place, and thus reestablish your own personal worth, by calmly explaining to him that he is in the wrong, and wouldn't act that way if he knew better. There are even extremely subtle ways to get back at someone so gently that he has nothing to complain about, and yet making sure at the same time that he realizes that he is the one who was wrong, and who is therefore inferior. All of which changes nothing in the fundamental intentions. The goal is to defend my self-worth, to make it very clear to the other person that he is wrong to look down on me, and thus to allow myself to feel good again after I have been put down.

The loop closes back on itself

We always have the impression, after putting someone in his place in this way, that the situation has been dealt with. The person who attacked us has been shown how bad he is, and made to understand that that is no way to act. That way, he won't do it again!

Unfortunately, it very rarely works out that way. In fact, instead of calming the situation, it almost always makes it worse. Why?

It's really quite simple: It is extremely likely that the other person (who has the same motivations and personal problems as I do, when it comes right down to it) will not appreciate what I did to reestablish my self-worth where he is concerned. He is almost sure to take my response as an ill-intentioned action.

Nor is he wrong to do so, if we look at the situation honestly. Every action which seeks to bring me pleasure at the cost of making someone else uncomfortable is, by definition, an ill-intentioned action. If I want to put someone down in order to reestablish my own self-worth, then the goal of my action is unarguably my own good, and not his. The fact that he deserves to be put down changes nothing; that is still what I am doing.

And the reason for which he does not appreciate my ill-intentioned action is that he sees it as an attack. It means that I am putting him down, that I am minimizing his self-worth. (Which is exactly what I am doing, after all. The clear and explicit goal of "putting in his place" someone who did me wrong is to show him that

he is no good.)

And he, too, needs to feel that he is worth something. Since he feels that his personal worth is attacked, he must defend himself. Therefore, he will find a way to reestablish his self-worth, by putting me down.

In other words, he will react towards me exactly the way I reacted towards him, and for precisely the same reasons.

All of which seems rather strange, though. It would be normal for him to act that way if I attacked him out of the blue, if I hurt him when he had done me no wrong. But since he is the one who started it all, one could expect him to realize that my actions were a normal and justified reaction to his attack. Therefore, he has no reason to complain about what I did. He simply got what he deserved for the way he acted.

It is extremely important to realize that, with very, very rare exceptions, the other person will not look at it this way, though, and to understand why. He will take my reaction as an unjustified attack, even if he started the whole thing, for the simple reason that **he does not think that he started it!** In one way or another, he felt that his initial action, the one that I didn't appreciate, was justified.

There are times when we don't see any possible way that someone could think a certain action was justified, but it is a fact that most people are fully convinced, pretty much all the time, that they have a right to do what they do. And since he thinks his actions were justified, he sees no reason for which I should have taken it the way I did. In other words, he interprets my reaction much differently from the way I do. For me, it was a normal and justifiable way to respond to an unjust attack, but for him it was an unreasonable way to act. Thus, he will be fully persuaded that **I** am the one who started the conflict!

And since he is convinced of that, he will do exactly what I did when I felt the same way: He will put me down, "put me in my place", because I acted in a way that, to his thinking, is entirely wrong.

But whatever he does to get back at me is itself an ill-intentioned action, and I will almost surely know it. I won't appreciate it, I will feel attacked, and so on. The loop closes back on itself, as figure 2 shows. "Here we go 'round again!"

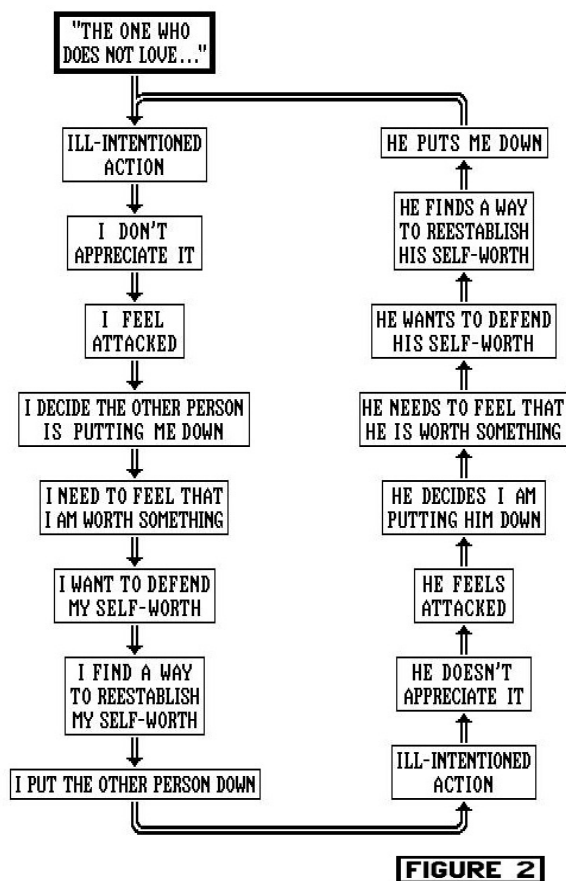


FIGURE 2

The driving principle of the vicious circle

This closed loop is the basis of the "vicious circle of hostility" that is shown in figure 3. Each step in the circle leads to the following step (as long as we act according to certain principles, in any case), and the situation has no natural tendency to calm down of its own accord. Each person believes himself justified in reacting to the attacks of the other person. He even feels that he must do so, in order to defend his self-worth. So attack follows attack, with each person sincerely convinced that it is the other one who is in the wrong. But such sincerity does nothing to keep the relationship from degenerating further and further.

Due to the tendency to "up the stakes" in each reaction, this mechanism often ends up destroying the relationship entirely. A marriage, a family, a church, or a nation, can be completely torn apart by tensions that started with ridiculously minor irritations. The quarrel ends up taking on dramatic proportions since each party feels obligated to get back at the other one more strongly than before, because of the attacks of the other one who was (of course) in the wrong.

To be perfectly honest, figure 3 has to include the fact that I could be the one who started the thing in the first place, too. If someone does not act according to love, he may well act towards me in a way that is ill-intentioned. But I can do the same thing, if I am the one who fails to act out of love. (Once again, I have borrowed a well-known Biblical phrase to illustrate this, and once again I am using it in a way that has little to do with its original context. It is merely a handy phrase.) Even though no one ever feels responsible for having deliberately started such a break-down in a personal relationship, it is too easy to suppose that it is always "the other person" who is in the wrong. Especially since I am "the other person", from the other's point of view....

We should notice, however, that if someone who does not act out of love does discover the principle of love, he or she can choose to act differently. This is not a way out of the vicious circle, but at least it is a way to not get it started in the first place. The principles that underlie this way of acting in love, and thus

avoiding the vicious circle of hostility, are found many times and in many ways in the Bible. I have chosen two verses that seem important to illustrate them.

The first one is found in I Jn. 4:19. It is true that there is an important variation in the manuscripts concerning this verse. Some of them have "We love God" or "We love Him" at the beginning of the verse. Nevertheless, the reading that flows the most naturally from the context, and which seems to be somewhat better attested in the oldest manuscripts, makes the principle involved a much more general one: "We love, because He first loved us."

It is true, of course, that we love God because He first loved us, but the principle goes much further than that. In a very general way, we can act according to true love only when we understand God's love for us. If someone does not know God, and thus does not know the love that God has for him, he can only act according to the flesh. He will do what brings him the most pleasure.

But acting according to divine love means seeking the good of others, even if it costs me. That is not a motivation that comes naturally to sinful man. It is only when we know we are loved by God, with a perfect, eternal, and unconditional love, that we can show that same kind of love to others.

The second verse I have chosen to illustrate the motivation that allows us to act in love has already been quoted, since it shows the basic principle that allows us to overcome feelings of inferiority. It is Ps. 34:5, "Those who look to Him are radiant." If we are truly filled with the joy of knowing God, we will not act according to our carnal instincts, seeking our own interests. We will seek what is good for others, instead of hurting those around us.

And when we act in love, we are free of "vicious circles". They just don't get started, as long as everyone acts in love.

But that is, unfortunately, rarely the way life is. And if either of the persons involved does not act out of love (whether it is me or the other one), this vicious circle of hostility is going to start up. Each one will have to defend himself against the attacks of the other one. And since each one will always think he is justified in what he is doing (even if such an attitude is totally incomprehensible to the one he is hurting), he will always take the other's reactions to his attacks as unprovoked aggression, and get back at him once again, to defend himself.

Jesus spoke of just these kinds of situations in Luke 6:27-38. The text is worth considering in detail:

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you?"

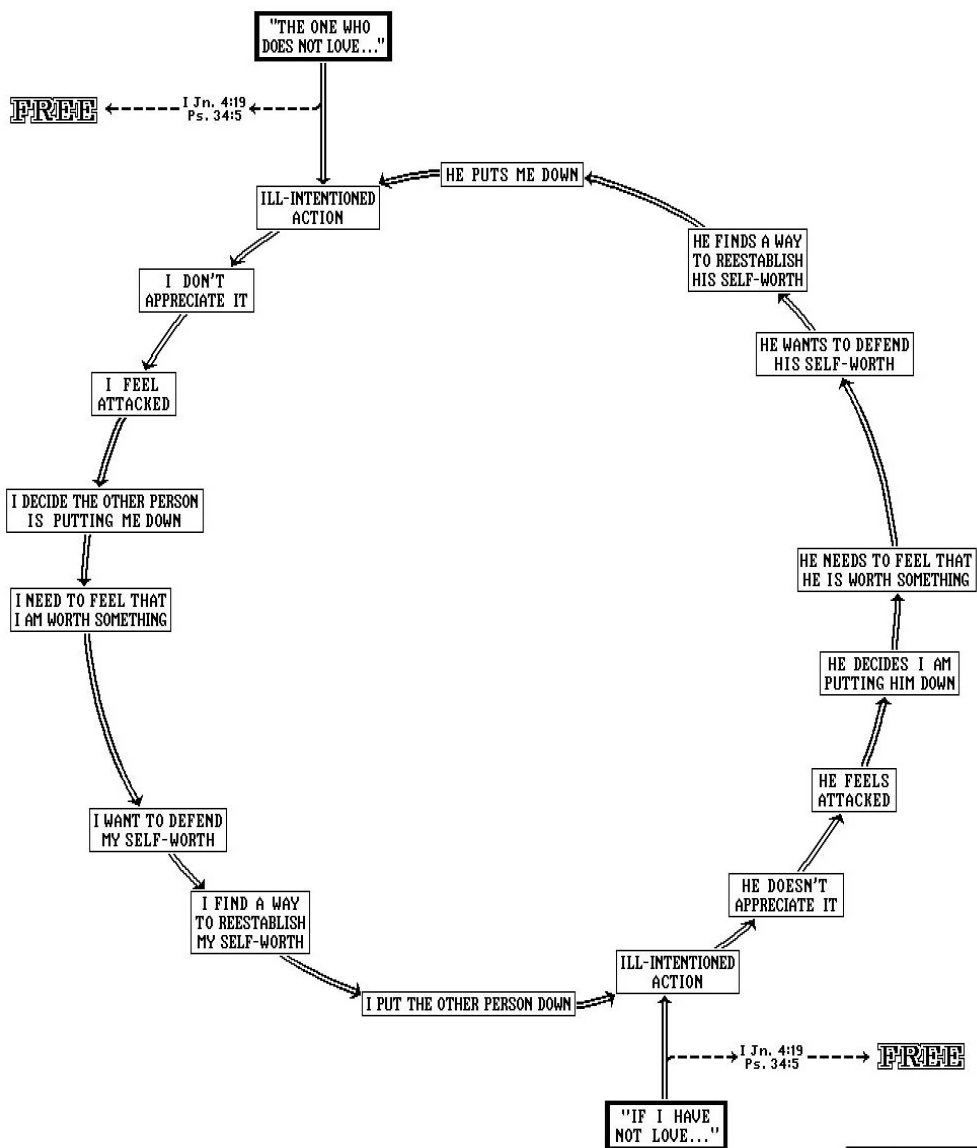


FIGURE 3

Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners', expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (NIV)

It is fairly common to hear someone say, "I'm nice with everyone, as long as they show a little consideration for me." Many people even think that they are being very "pious" with such an attitude. But in this passage Jesus destroys the pretentiousness of those who reason that way. He says there is nothing special in loving those who are good to us. True Christians must go much, much farther than that, and love even those who hurt us. What Jesus is actually saying here can be summed up as, "Put a stop to these vicious circles."

With the best intentions in the world, that is not an easy thing to do. But we are going to see, in very practical ways, how it is possible to put Jesus' teaching into practice. We are not doomed to continue forever in the mechanisms of this vicious circle of hostility.

FALSE SOLUTIONS

There are various ways of trying to break out of this vicious circle. Not all of them actually work. Some of our attempts to "calm things down" are just ways of fooling ourselves, while continuing to play the game of defending our own self-worth.

The first "solution" we are going to look at is that of trying to reestablish our self-worth without putting the other person down. We realize quickly enough, as Christians, that putting others down to get even with them for hurting us (that is called "getting revenge", even when we refuse to admit it) is not a demonstration of Christian love.

But since we have to reestablish our worth, the idea is to give ourselves worth without hurting the person who tried to show that he is better than us, without putting him down or insulting him in any way. In other words, it's more a question of increasing my worth than diminishing the other person's. I don't really need to put anyone else down, as long as I can demonstrate my own personal worth. To myself first of all, and if I can show it to the other person at the same time, that's even better.

Proving your self-worth

You can prove your self-worth in any number of ways. By insisting on certain qualities you have, for example. "Well, I might not have gotten the best of that deal, but I'm still smarter than he is, in any case." Or by making a greater effort than ever in your work, in school, in sports, or in whatever interests you. Anything to prove that you are worth something, that you are someone.

And if the other person doesn't notice, or care, you can always tell yourself that that doesn't matter too much. Sure, it would be nice for him to realize how good you are, but what is his opinion worth anyway? Who cares what he thinks? What is most important is to know yourself what you are worth. This is a way of establishing your self-worth without the other person being able to say you are attacking him. That will put an end to the vicious circle of hostility, at least, because the other person will have nothing to complain about. you haven't hurt him back for the wrong he did.

And yet, there are plenty of examples to show that this approach almost never puts an end to personal quarrels. You feel attacked, and instead of attacking back you work at proving your own value, at showing your good qualities, but the other one keeps right on attacking you. Why?

The answer is fairly simple. Insisting on your own qualities, trying to show yourself that you are as good as others if not better, is pride. And no one likes proud people. Even if the goal is only to prove yourself to yourself, and not to show off to everyone else, the desire to prove how good you are, to demonstrate your innate personal worth, is the very definition of pride.

It should be noted that there are very subtle and even "spiritual" ways of doing this. We can pretend that as Christians, we are "above" such carnal impulses as getting even when we are attacked, for example. Many Christians have even gone so far as to openly tell the person who has done them wrong, "It's all right. I did the same kind of things when I was younger in the faith." In other words, "I am a more mature believer than you are, I am nearer to God than you are, I understand grace better than you do, I obey God's Word better than you do...." Those are just ways of insisting on our own superiority, and pride is still pride, even when it pretends to be "spiritual".

Whether we like it or not, pride is an ill-intentioned way of acting. The goal of pride is very clearly to demonstrate our own worth, to show that we are better than others. And if we are better than them, then they are less than us. (Even if we don't say it, even if we pretend we don't think it, that's the idea. Always.) And we are right back at the definition of ill-intentioned actions: seeking your own good at someone else's expense.

And it is very likely that the other person will resent it, too. Especially as we really would like others--particularly those who wronged us--to see how good we are, and thus realize how wrong they were to look down on us. In one way or another, pride means trying to show off your own worth.

Others will see it if I am acting in pride, even if I am very subtle about it. They will understand that I am trying to prove myself better than they are, and they won't like it. It happens fairly often that we think someone did something out of pride when he actually didn't, but it is extremely rare that we don't realize it when someone really is proud.

To be sure, the primary reason that we are bothered by someone else's pride is that we are proud ourselves. It is only because I want to be someone that I resent others thinking and acting as though they were better than me. But there is no consolation in telling myself that others would not be bothered by my pride if they were not proud themselves. They could say the same thing about me. The unfortunate fact of life is that we are proud, all of us. I am, you are, everyone is. It's part of being a sinner. Perfect, sinless people would not take personal offense at someone else being proud (even though he would still be wrong to do so; pride can only come from sin), but we do not live among perfect people. We have to deal with the real world, and in the real world, trying to prove your worth by insisting on your own good qualities will not put an end to vicious circles of hostility. People will simply resent the pride that involves, and take it (correctly) as a way of looking down on them.

It is true that very few people will understand the psychological principles involved enough to know explicitly why they feel attacked by other people's pride. They don't need to. It is enough that they don't appreciate pride, that it somehow feels just like any other attack on their self-worth.

Avoiding the troublemaker

So you have to find something else. If you attack in return, that just fuels the fight. If you try to prove you are better than they are without attacking them, the result is the same. So it seems that the only way to end the vicious circle of continuous attacks is simply to avoid the other person. Just don't talk to them any more. Or if you do talk, stay on a very superficial level that won't bother anyone. That way there won't be any more problems.

And yet, once again, it just doesn't work out that way. People will still take that as an attack. It is important to understand why.

The whole idea of true love is to establish deep personal relationships, relationships that are enjoyable and edifying for everyone. If we refuse such relationships with someone because we feel that they put us down, then we are refusing to love. It is not for the good of the other person that we act that way, after all, but for our own good (even though we might pretend that it is for his good as well). We deprive the others of our friendship, because it hurts too much to maintain a relationship with them. They attack us too much.

Someone might reply that refusing contact with someone who is in the wrong is exactly what the Bible recommends in certain cases. The process explained in Mt. 18:15-17 ends with the cutting off of fellowship, as I Cor. 5:9-13 shows very clearly. Why then do I say that avoiding contact with someone is a refusal to love them?

It is the underlying motivation that makes the difference. In the mechanism of the vicious circle, we are speaking of avoiding someone as a way of defending our own self-worth, by not giving the other the chance to put us down. But the passages that speak of cutting off fellowship with someone are seeking an entirely different end (which we will not go into right now in any detail, though we will come back to it further on). If I refuse contact with someone because I feel attacked by him, as a way of defending my self-worth, it is my well-being that is the primary goal, not his. This is, once again, the very definition of an ill-intentioned action. In reality, it is merely a subtle way of reestablishing my own self-worth, relative to him.

He will know that, and he will resent it very much. If I refuse to have any serious contacts with him, then it is because I don't think he is good enough for me. He is perfectly correct in taking that as a kind of attack.

If you aren't sure of this, think how you would react if the situation were reversed. If someone won't have anything to do with you because they are mad at you over something, you know very well you would resent it. And you wouldn't be wrong to feel that way. None of us like people who are "cool" towards us. We feel like they are putting us down, and they are. Therefore, if I act that way towards someone else, he will feel the same thing. And the vicious circle will go on....

Figure 4 adds these variations to the diagram we already have. They are not at all a way out of the circle, but simply alternative ways to reestablish our self-worth. They feed the circle just as much as any other way of establishing our self-worth.

All that really means is that each of us works at "getting back at the other one" a little bit differently.

There are pretty much limitless ways to show off your own worth, but that changes nothing where the root motivation is concerned. When someone is criticized, he might get mad and use violence (physical or verbal) to get even with the other one. Someone else, in the same situation, might just close up on himself, refusing to love someone he doesn't consider as lovable. There are lots of possibilities, according to the personalities and ingenuity of each one of us. A Jacob will find subtle and complicated ruses to get his way, while an Esau will choose a much more direct approach: "I'm gonna kill him!"

These different ways of dealing with the problem of someone who attacks our personal worth should not fool us. The fundamental idea is always the same. The different approaches really only reflect our differing abilities and temperaments. The root motivation is still, "I want to prove what I am worth." That means that one way of getting back at the other person is no more "spiritual" than another one. Of course, we might find

one person's way of responding to provocation less disagreeable than another's: I can get along better with someone who is a little more fearful, who prefers to close up on himself and consider me as unworthy of his friendship, than with someone who gets violently angry and beats me up. But even if the way of acting is different, the sin is the same: Both of them are seeking to give themselves an innate worth.

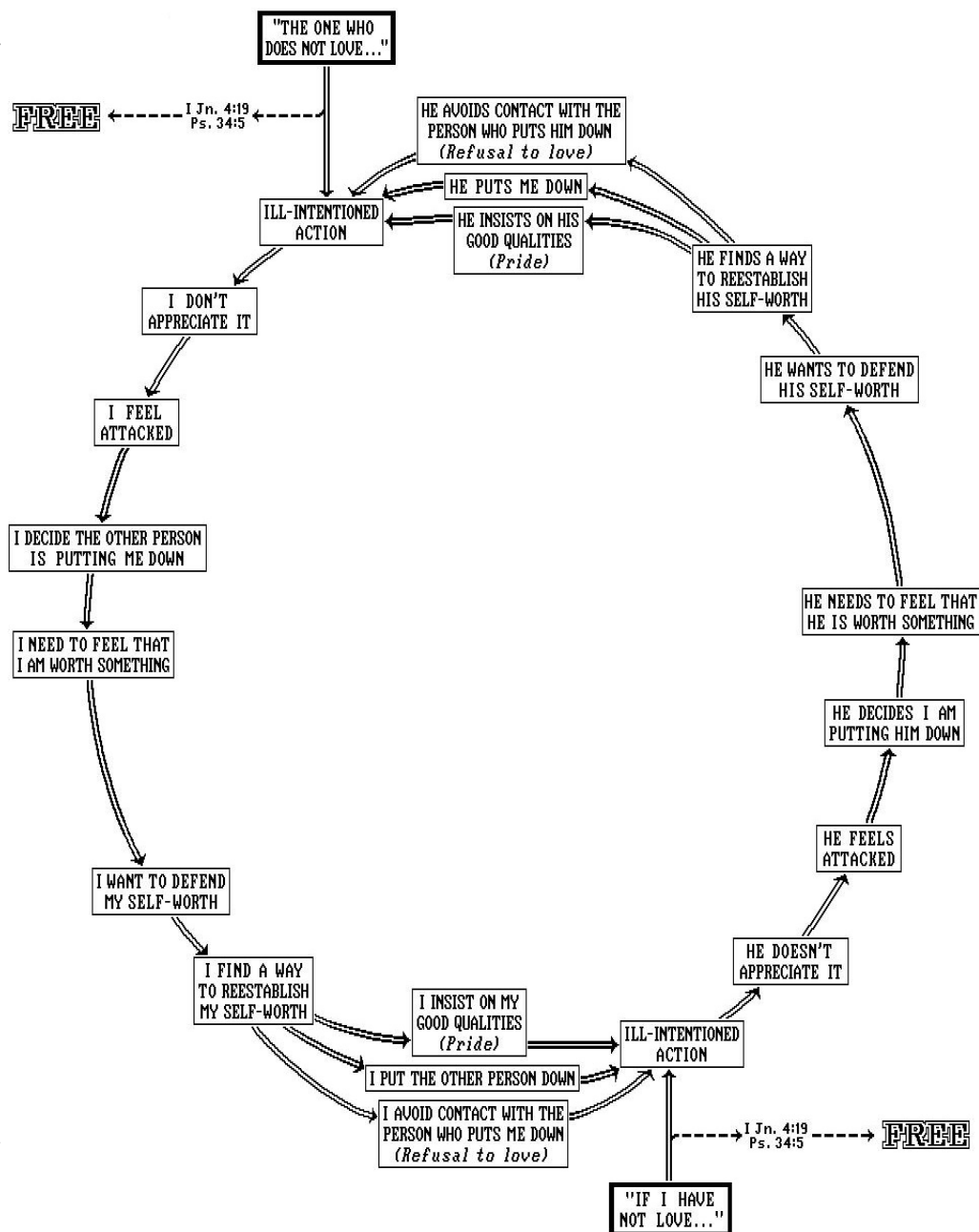


FIGURE 4

Accept to be nothing

It seems, then, that the fundamental error is in the very fact of wanting to defend your self-worth. No matter how you seek to reestablish your worth, you're wrong. Therefore, the basic problem must be this inner need to feel like you're worth something. And it is true that that seems a bit, shall we say, "unbefitting" for a Christian. Sure, we all feel this same need, but that doesn't prove anything. Since we're all sinners, there are lots of feelings and ideas and attitudes that come naturally to our hearts, but which are still sin.

So, somewhat reluctantly, you decide that a proper attitude means giving up your self-worth. You accept to be nothing. "He must increase, but I must decrease," as John the Baptist put it in Jn. 3:30.

It is true that in the context, John wasn't talking at all about no longer having any self-worth. But that doesn't matter; there are plenty of other passages that seem to go along the same lines. Take I Cor. 4:9-13, for example: "For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated,

we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world." (NIV)

And of course there's the attitude of Christ Himself. When He was accused, he didn't open His mouth. He didn't seek at all to defend Himself. As Christians, we are to have the same motivations as He had, so we must do the same thing. (As for those occasions when Christ did defend Himself, as in Jn. 10:31-39 for example, we just ignore them, or find some other way to explain them.)

We consciously choose to refuse to desire any particular self-worth. The attitude of the Christian must be, "I am worth nothing. I can let people make fun of me and look down on me. I consider myself as nothing." In any case, this is exactly what a fair number of Christian preachers and teachers are saying. They tell us we should never defend our rights, never respond when we are wrongly accused or insulted. We should willingly accept to be less than everyone else.

But be careful. The human heart is twisted, and we can fool ourselves in very subtle ways. It is easy to pretend that this is what we are doing, when in fact we are defending our self-worth by our spiritual pride, by being "proud of our humility". There is a world of difference between, "I don't respond because I am spiritually above such a carnal attitude," and, "I don't respond because I admit that I am nothing." The one who consoles himself when he is attacked by thinking that this shows his spiritual qualities is not "nothing". He is defending his worth. He is still in the track that we saw in figure 4. There are plenty of people who are meek and unassuming outwardly, who give an appearance of great humility, but who are in fact very proud, in a rather subtle way. They are proud of their "spirituality" in having a temperament that is less aggressive than most people. I have had such people "put me in my place" very gently when I crossed them up, but the fact that it was gentle changed nothing at all in the fundamental motivation. They made it very clear that I was wrong, that I lacked spiritual maturity, and that if I had the grace to adopt the same spiritual attitudes they had I wouldn't act the way I did!

All that means that it is much more difficult to honestly renounce any need for self-worth than what we usually think. We are talking about truly accepting the fact that we have no particular value. Others have the right to look down on us, because we truly are worthless. This is the only attitude that genuinely refuses this inner need to have self-worth.

It is worth noticing that some people decide this, not because they choose to, but because they are forced to it. Unable to find anything in themselves of which they can be proud, no longer believing in themselves, they let themselves be convinced that they are worth nothing, that the world would be better off without them. They are not doing this for spiritual reasons; many of those who adopt this attitude do not even pretend to be Christians.

A Christian, however, can consciously and explicitly choose this attitude, in order to turn from pride. This will get us out of the vicious circle, because we repress this need to feel that we are worth something. If someone else attacks us, insults us, or looks down on us, we will let him do it. Anyone who wants to can walk all over us.

This "doormat complex", as I call it, does not work, however. Not for long, in any case. We might put up with being nothing for a day, for two days, for a few weeks even, but it tears us apart inside. We simply are not made to think that we are worthless. And in any case, it is not true that we are worthless. God made us "a little lower than the angels" (Ps. 8:5, KJV, the most reasonable interpretation of the text). Jesus said we are much more valuable than the birds of the air (Mt. 6:26). Sure, we will never overcome our feelings of inferiority by concerning ourselves with our innate worth, but it is there even so. We are as wrong in deciding that we are worth nothing as we are in attempting, in pride, to be sufficient unto ourselves because of that worth.

When we think we are worthless, that creates serious tensions in us, tensions that grow and grow the longer we maintain this attitude. Consider the case of those who, for one reason or another, are forced to end up feeling this way about themselves. Are they happy? Do they manifest a more balanced character than those who boast about their self-worth? Not at all. In fact, they're miserable. It tears them completely apart inside. What sense is there in choosing to imitate them? (And if that's not what we're doing, then we are simply reestablishing our self-worth by other means than our capacity for getting even, which just puts us back in the vicious circle, as we have seen.)

These tensions will keep on growing until they become unbearable. And along the way, they will produce plenty of other problems. A great many medical problems are caused by such psychological imbalances that upset the organic systems of the body. Some of these problems can even be extremely serious. In any case, there is no way to think that this attitude does us any good, for however long it lasts.

What normally happens is that after a while, a person who has tried to refuse the need to be worth something changes their mind, decides they are worth something after all, and chooses to defend their self-worth. That of course just brings them back into the vicious circle, but only after a detour that made the problem that much worse. Having let themselves be treated like dirt for so long, they are likely to use much more violent means to defend themselves than if they had never tried to repress this need to be worth something in the first place.

Escape from reality

The only other thing they can do, however, is even worse, and that is to escape from reality. Since the real world has become unbearable, they make up their own little world. There are plenty of ways to do this. TV, books, fantasies, and so on, can all become ways of escaping from reality. And there are more dangerous ways of doing it, too. Alcoholism and drugs are also ways of fleeing from the real world. The flight from reality can even cause extremely serious psychological problems, such as schizophrenia, autism, catatonia, or just about any of the other major psychological imbalances that are called psychoses. And if nothing else works, if the world is just too unbearable, a person can even end up committing suicide, in order to flee from a reality that just seems too awful to bear.

(A digression is necessary here, even though it is not our subject in this study. The serious problems mentioned in the previous paragraph are the result of very complex mechanisms, which vary enormously from one person to another. Some psychoses, for example, are very clearly of organic origin. And suicide is not always an escape from reality. What's more, the feeling that we are not worth anything is by no means the only cause of attempted escapes from reality. We need to be extremely prudent in this area. Unless you have the proper training to deal with the subject, do not think you are competent to analyze psychotic disorders simply on the basis of the foregoing remarks. I bring the subject up only to show what can happen, in certain cases, when a person feels worthless, and to show what can be, in some situations, the cause or partial cause of these disorders. But a couple of paragraphs on how badly we can get off track when we don't feel we have any particular self-worth are in no way a sufficient explanation of the mechanisms behind such serious psychological problems.)

Fortunately, there are not all that many people who end up escaping from reality, especially among those who, for "spiritual" reasons, voluntarily choose to renounce their need to have any worth. It is good that they do not. Coming back into the vicious circle of attacking the other in order to defend your self-worth is not any solution, but it is less bad than escaping from reality.

It should also be noticed that an escape from reality does not have to be permanent. There are many people who do it for a time, but who end up deciding that they can, and must, defend their self-worth. (This possibility is indicated by a dotted line in figure 5, leading from "Escape from reality" back onto the main track of the vicious circle. It is dotted because not all those who try to escape from reality ever get back into a

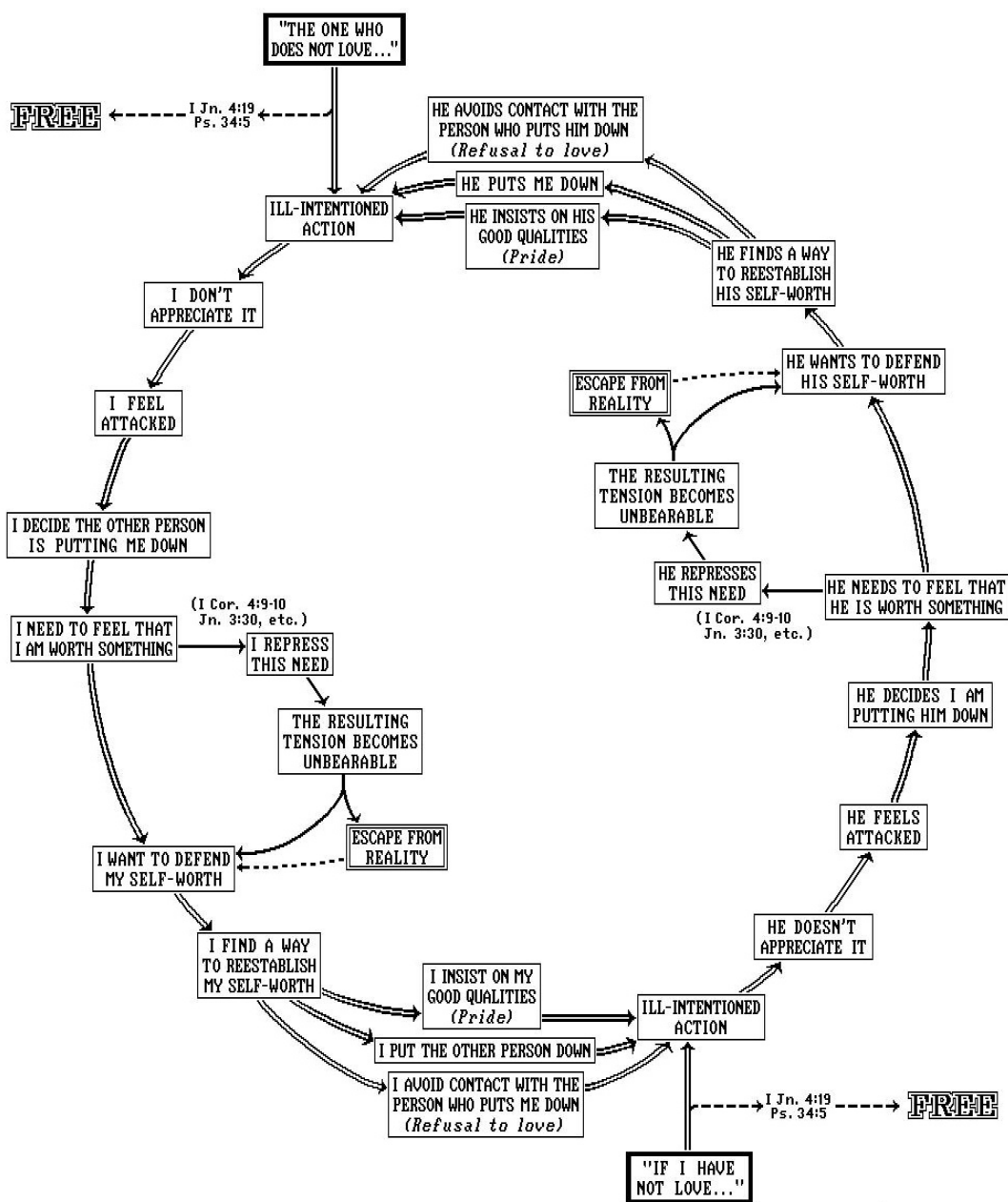


FIGURE 5

"normal" frame of mind.) Deciding that they can, and should, defend their self-worth, is a good thing in a way, even if it is not yet a solution. There is absolutely nothing at all to be gained in fleeing from reality. Our problems can be overcome only in the real world.

What all that means is that repressing our need of having self-worth, even if it seems so "spiritual" at first, is not at all a solution. The Biblical passages that may seem to encourage us to adopt such an attitude are not actually talking about that at all, when we examine them in their context. There is nothing to be gained by imitating people who suffer from a genuine inferiority complex. Jesus never ever displayed such an attitude. He was in fact a man who was very sure of His worth. The same is true of John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, and all the others who are supposed to be teaching us this self-belittling attitude. There are times when it is appropriate not to insist on your rights, not to respond to an attack. But that never means that we should think we are worthless in doing so.

That is why I have put the track that shows this attitude inside the circle in figure 5. Repressing our need to be worth something does not get us out of the vicious circle at all. Either we end up coming back to the circle, or we end up in a dead end that is even worse. But this attitude will not enable us to put into practice what Jesus taught in Luke 6:27-38.

SOLUTIONS THAT WORK

Any real way out of the vicious circle has to be somewhere else, then. In fact, there are several ways out, depending on the circumstances. All situations are not alike, and the appropriate way to respond to the bothersome behavior of others depends on a number of factors.

All actions are not ill-intentioned

First of all, let's look at the very beginning of the vicious circle. We saw that a person who is not motivated by love can deliberately behave in a harmful way, without it being a way of "getting back" at someone. This lack of love can come from a number of sources, of course. A thief can rob someone he doesn't even know, simply out of greed, for example. Or someone who feels inferior in general might make fun of a handicapped person just for the fun of feeling better than someone else for once. And it often happens that someone who feels put down in a vicious circle and can't find a way out or a way to at least

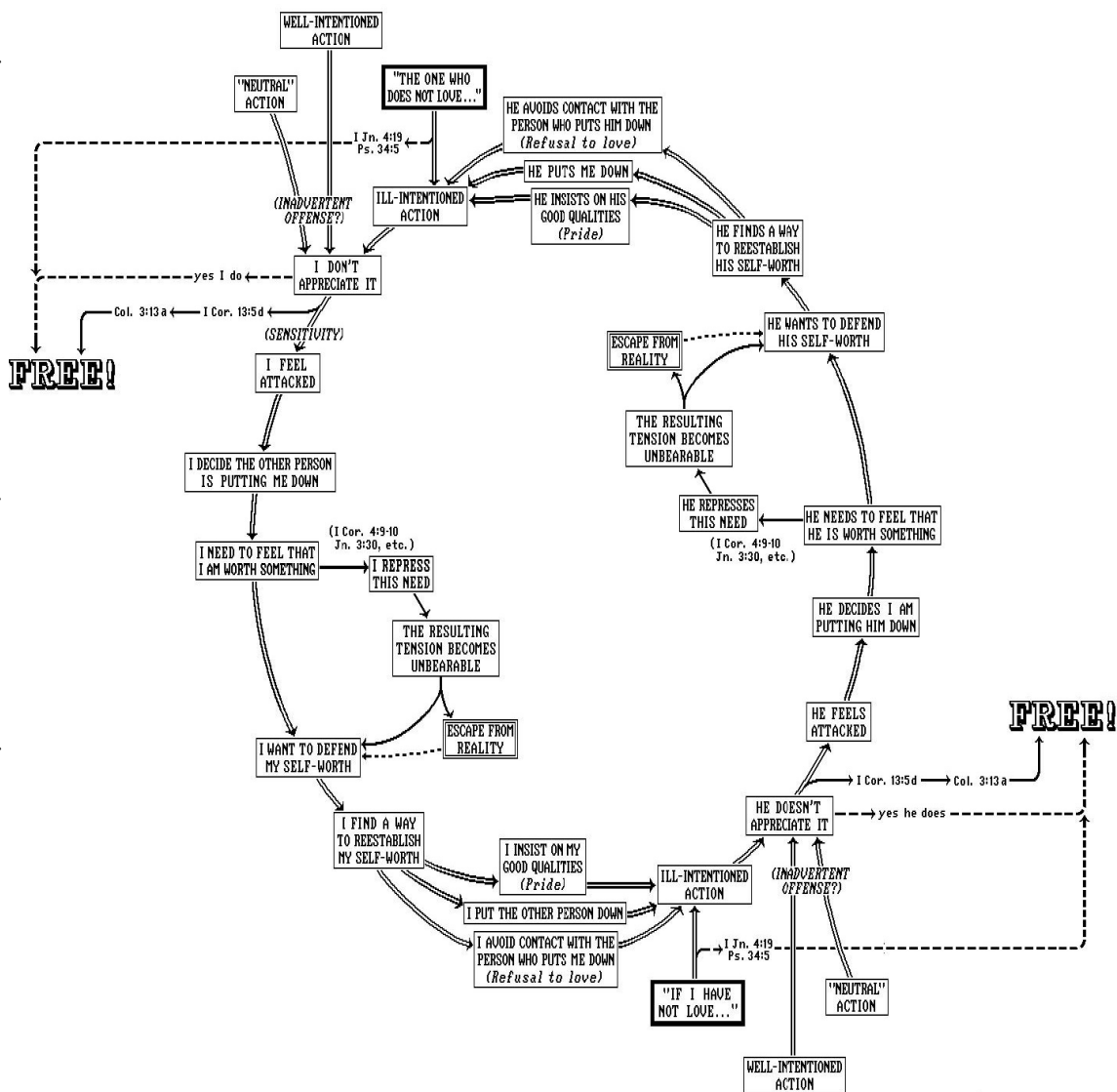


FIGURE 6

feel like he's getting the best of it can lack love towards other people. It's a way of saving something of his self-worth, or course, even if it doesn't affect the person he's fighting with, but it will set off other cycles of hostility, with other people.

All that is rarer than you might think, however. It is true that we often think that a problem started with someone deliberately acting mean, but in reality that is almost never how "vicious circles" get started. The true source is something else.

Let's start off with the obvious fact that every action is not ill-intentioned. Some are, of course, but others are well-intentioned. And still others are "neutral", in that the goal is neither to do good to someone else, nor to do anyone any harm. Life often puts us in contact with people in ways that preclude any real intentions one way or the other. I go to the post office, I buy some stamps, and I go my way. My actions touched several people (the person behind the counter, those in line with me, etc.), but I did not have slightest "intention" towards them. I can't exactly say that I was there to do them good, but I certainly wasn't there to hurt anyone, either. As far as my intentions were concerned, my action was neutral.

But are ill-intentioned actions the only ones that might not be appreciated by someone? Not at all. Plenty of neutral or even well-intentioned actions might be taken wrong by someone. It would be entirely false to think that only ill-intentioned actions set off these vicious circles of repeated hostility. Neutral actions and even well-intentioned actions, if they are taken wrong, will do so just as easily.

For one thing, such actions might be taken wrong because they can easily involve an inadvertent offense. No one always has all the tact and all the grace that are necessary in life. In line at the post office, for example, I might have bumped into someone unintentionally. Such an action would not be ill-intentioned, since I didn't intend to do it. I might not even be aware that I did it. But it still wouldn't be appreciated. Or I might tell a joke to make someone laugh (a well-intentioned action), and have him take it wrong. Or you can tell someone something that they need to know, but because you didn't do it gently enough, he won't be happy with you for saying it. Inadvertent offenses are all around us, and we all do them.

It should also be noticed that a lack of grace and tact that causes me to hurt someone without meaning to is by no means the only thing that can cause someone to take a neutral or well-intentioned action wrong. Someone might correct me in the best and most appropriate way imaginable, in an area where I desperately needed to be corrected, and I still wouldn't appreciate it. The idea seems to have come up somewhere that Christians should never do anything that bothers others in the least. This teaching is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Jesus often said and did things that others did not appreciate or approve. Does that mean we can accuse Him of being ill-intentioned, or even of lacking tact? I know that I myself have not always appreciated some things that happened to me. And yet, I have often realized later that the people involved were not wrong at all in what they did or said.

I do not honestly know which causes more quarrels: the lack of tact that means we do not always know the best way to speak and act, or the sin in us which causes us to take wrongly anything that goes against our ideas, even if the thing was absolutely necessary. What I do know is that there are plenty of examples of both, and that either one of them is a much more common source of tension than deliberately ill-intentioned actions "out of the blue".

The beginning of the vicious circle is thus much more complex than what we have seen so far. Instead of speaking only of ill-intentioned actions, we need to speak of neutral and well-intentioned actions as well. Any of the three may not be appreciated. Figure 6 thus includes all three of these possibilities.

Of course, it would be ridiculous to think that every action will be taken wrongly by others. It is possible that any of these three kinds of actions might not be appreciated, but that is by no means automatic. Normally, no one will be bothered by my going to the post office, for example. For this reason, figure 6 includes an "exit" from the vicious circle that is not at all the result of someone consciously wanting to calm things down. It is simply the fact that in real life, everything is not taken wrongly. Fortunately. From the box marked "I don't appreciate it", there is thus the arrow marked "Yes I do," which leads out of the vicious circle. It should be obvious that if I appreciate something, or if I take it as a "neutral" action, there is no reason to start a vicious circle by "getting back" at someone for it.

It is interesting to note that that might be the result even for an ill-intentioned action. It can happen that you try to get back at someone, and it doesn't work out that way at all. Not only does the other one not realize you were trying to hurt him, he might even appreciate what you did. That outcome is not the most common one, of course, but it happens.

It would be extremely useful for us to distinguish between those acts which we do not appreciate, but which were not ill-intentioned, and genuine attacks. The fourth phrase of I Cor. 13:5 has been translated a number of ways, because the original text is not really clear, but I think the idea is best communicated by a French translation (Second, for those who care) that basically says, "Love does not suspect evil". In other words, a person who is motivated by love will give the other the benefit of the doubt, just as far as possible. Instead of suspecting bad intentions everywhere, love prefers to think (and it is a deliberate choice, not just some "feeling" that comes over you) that others are not mad at us or out to get us. At worst, any hurt is unintentional, and merely means that the person (like everyone else) does not always know the best possible way to act, and in many cases the person actually has every right to think, talk, or act the way he does, even

if I don't happen to appreciate it.

If someone doesn't say hello to me, for example, it might be that he was preoccupied with other things. If he speaks to me in an abrupt way, it may be that he was more concerned with being sure that his meaning was very clear, and didn't realize that he was lacking in tact. If someone bumps into me, that doesn't mean he lacks consideration for others; anyone can do that. Even Biblical prophets were not always appreciated--not by a long shot--despite the fact that they spoke and acted for the good of the people, and according to the direction of God Himself. Very often, if we choose to think so, we can find an explanation for someone's actions that means he was not ill-intentioned, even if his behavior bothers us.

Putting up with unpleasantness

Once we've gotten that far, we can apply a principle that Paul gives us in Col. 3:13. Paul teaches two distinct ideas in this verse; they go together because they both deal with our reaction when others act in a way we don't like. He writes, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Paul is saying that in our dealings with others, there are some things that must be forgiven, and others you need to put up with.

It is important to understand the difference. We forgive actions that are the result of genuine sin, deliberate wrongs that flow from a heart twisted by the refusal to live according to God's love. But we excuse, we put up with, those things that are merely inconvenient without there being any sin involved. We are different from each other, and our differences aren't always pleasing to everyone. With the best of intentions, we don't always act in an appropriate way, because of our shortcomings, our lack of tact, or even our lack of information. All of this might not be admirable, but it is human.

Instead of taking everything as a personal attack, we need to apply the principle of love thus doesn't suspect evil, and bear with each other. The first part of Col. 3:13 is very appropriate in this context. (We will see, a little further on, that the second part of the verse, the principle of forgiveness, also figures into getting out of vicious circles, but at a different point. Paul is telling us that there are times when we simply put up with behavior we don't particularly like, and other times when we forgive. The vicious circle diagram will help us to know which is which.)

The idea of bearing with each other is based on a truth that we often ignore, the fact that *others have the right to a character or a way of acting that is not to my personal liking*. Nobody ever said that others have to suit me at all times, or that I can go causing trouble and getting all upset every time the actions or words of those around me don't please me.

I am persuaded that this principle, all by itself, will already allow us to avoid a good part, and probably a majority, of these vicious circles. If we start off with the idea that no one should ever bother or annoy us, we will feel attacked and put down all the time, whenever something doesn't go the way we like. But if we know how to apply the Biblical principle of love that doesn't take everything wrong, but instead bears unpleasantness as a part of life, we will realize that most of the things that bother us in life still aren't personal attacks. There is no need to start a vicious circle over such things.

What is it that causes us to take things for attacks so easily, when we could often just accept in love the fact that others' way of acting doesn't happen to suit us? It is sensitivity, the touchiness that gets irritated easily. Sensitivity is one of the characteristics of a person who has not been able to deal with their problems of inferiority. If I am not sure of my worth, I will be much more prone to interpret others' actions as attacks on my person. Sensitivity, or touchiness, is one of the clear signs of someone who isn't at ease with himself. And if he has a real problem with inferiority, then that will show up (among others symptoms) by an excessive irritability, in situations where it would be very possible to simply put up with the inconvenience, out of love for others.

Just as knowing we are truly loved by God enables us to love others (I Jn. 4:19), so this same love helps us to overcome our own problems with inferiority. In fact, it is precisely because I am content with myself when I have my eyes solidly on God and His love for me, that I not only want to love others, but am able to do so. The wrong we do when we lack love (because we are not living according to God's love for us), is not at all limited to these deliberately ill-intentioned actions that we talked about at the beginning. The touchiness of a person who gets irritated for the least little thing is just as much an indication that that person is not really sure of God's love for him or her. Such sensitivity is therefore also the result of refusing to live in love.

To the extent that we have dealt with the problem of sensitivity, meaning the problem of inferiority (since sensitivity in this sense is one of the manifestations of feelings of inferiority), we will choose, as much as possible, to not impute wrong motives to others when things are not to our liking. Instead of thinking others are ill-intentioned, we will put up with actions and attitudes that do not suit us, out of love. Especially, we will realize that those whose behavior bothers us are not even necessarily wrong in doing so; they have as much right to their character as I have to mine. This solution for the vicious circle is diagrammed in figure 6. It is a way to be free of the problem, and though it doesn't apply to all situations, it applies to quite a few of them.

When we really are attacked

It would be too simple, however, to pretend that everything that bothers us in life is "normal, acceptable behavior". Without being particularly touchy, we can see quite easily that there are cases where someone really is attacking us. If someone punches me in the nose, for example, it is highly unlikely that it is simply because he doesn't know that isn't a proper way to say hello! Not every case where we feel attacked is due to sensitivity. We have all known situations where, in all honesty, we know very well that someone really was attacking us.

Does that mean that the next step, the decision that the other person really is putting me down, automatically follows? No, it doesn't. There are two types of situations in which that is not the case.

The first one is a situation where, despite appearances, the other person really doesn't want to hurt me. There are times when it seems so obvious that we are being attacked that we have no reason at all to doubt that the other person is after us (it is hard to give someone the benefit of the doubt when there is no doubt!), but it still isn't so. Even when we are sure of something, we can be wrong.

The second situation is much more common, but a bit harder to understand. There are many cases where someone's actions were in fact ill-intentioned, even though the person is not really "against me". The problem was that he felt attacked. He may have taken wrongly something I said or did, even though I had no ill intentions towards him, just as any of us may do, as has been seen. And because he felt attacked, he felt the need to get even. Or perhaps I am the one who took something he did wrongly, and then reacted according to the mechanisms of the vicious circle. I did or said something to put him in his place, but he couldn't understand why I did it, because he had not knowingly attacked me. The "offense" was in my mind, not in his actions.

One way or the other, he is playing the game of the vicious circle, trying to "put me in my place" in order to put an end to the thing. But he is not at all "out to get me" in a general sort of way. His intention is not really to put me down, but simply to make me stop attacking him. The fact that he may well have imagined my "attack" doesn't change what he is doing.

Here we are at the very heart of the principle behind the vicious circle. Working on the principle that everyone must respond to every perceived injustice, in order to defend his self-worth, the thing just keeps going and going, once it gets started. Even if it gets started over a silly misunderstanding about someone's intentions. Everyone is willing to end it, but not to be the one to end it, because they don't want to let the other one "get the better of it".

But suppose someone did stop playing the game? What if someone, instead of responding to what they perceive as hostility (what might well be hostility in fact), just acted as if nothing had happened, instead of finding some blatant or subtle way of getting even? In many, many cases, the relationship would calm down right away. Especially if someone did it before the thing had gone too far. All that either of them wants is for the other to start attacking them. But as long as both refuse to be the one who "loses out", as long as both are too proud to let the other one get away with thinking he got the better of them, the situation will continue forever.

"Turn the other cheek"

This is where we can apply one of the principles we saw in Luke 6:27-38. In verse 29, Jesus said, "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic." Figure 7 includes this as a way of getting out of the vicious circle. Instead of automatically deciding that the other person is putting us down, that is, that he is against us as a general principle (as opposed to an isolated act or two, due to his perception of the circumstances), we can turn the other cheek.

Contrary to what we might think, Jesus is not asking us to be doormats here. In any case, we have already seen that that doesn't work. Jesus is not saying that we should continually let ourselves be abused, without ever taking any steps to protect ourselves. He simply tells us how we can--and must--keep from setting off vicious circles when the situation can be taken care of much more simply.

We need to understand exactly what Jesus said. He used two different images to communicate His teaching, and the images have an important point in common: Neither of them refers to something that goes on indefinitely. He says, "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also." But it would be absurd to add, "And if he strikes the other, turn the third one to him." He says also that if someone takes your cloak, you should not stop him from taking your tunic as well. But a cloak and a tunic were pretty much the total clothing of the average person in those times. If the person does take your tunic, there isn't much more he can take.

Jesus is not saying, then, that we should continually let others take advantage of us and mistreat us. Instead, His idea is that we should give them a second chance. That will enable us to test the situation, and find out if the other person really is against us.

If this was a case where, despite apparently clear appearances, the other person really didn't have any ill intentions towards us, the thing will stop then and there. The other person probably won't ever even know that he bothered us, and won't need to know. And if it was the more common situation of someone simply wanting to "put us in our place" because he thinks (rightly or wrongly) that we did something to him, he will be satisfied with having "won", and the thing will stop anyway. Sure, he was wrong to try to "get back at us", but what is the most important is that the quarrel comes to an end.

But it is very, very important to understand what must be done, and especially, what must not be done. "Turning the other cheek" means that you don't do anything in particular to react to what has been done, and also that you remain in a situation where the person could do it again as well. In other words, it means acting as if you really never noticed anything at all of the real or supposed offense.

When we "turn the other cheek", it is permissible to encourage the other person to act in a more seemly manner by being nice, or even by communicating to them--indirectly--principles that will help them to see the situation differently. But you can't confront them directly with it, no matter how gently. That is not "turning the other cheek". To be sure, there are situations where it is perfectly appropriate to do that, and we will consider them a little further on. But Jesus' principle here is something else. At this point in the conflict, it is not yet appropriate. The idea in "turning the other cheek" is that the person not be criticized in any way for what they did (not from the outside, anyway--it may well be that the person will be accused by their own conscience, or that God will speak to them), so that they may have the chance to correct their behavior themselves.

How many times should we "turn the other cheek" before deciding that the other person really is against us? Sometimes, once will be enough. Other times, it may be wise to do so several times. But Jesus is not telling us to continually let others attack us, or that we should never respond to unjust behavior. (This is not the case of someone who has done us wrong, but who then repents and asks forgiveness. In that case, as is well known, Jesus says that we should forgive him and leave the situation behind as many times as it takes. See Mt. 18:21-22.) A Christian should not encourage sin, even tacitly, by never reacting to those whose behavior is blatantly unjust. But here, when the problem between two people is just getting started, Jesus says you should just ignore it a time or two, in order to test the other person's true intentions. Are they really against us or not?

It isn't easy to "turn the other cheek", for a couple of reasons. First of all, there is the obvious risk of getting hurt a second time. When we not only could have avoided it, but even had good reasons to suspect that it might happen. But more than that, even if the other person doesn't do anything more, "turning the other

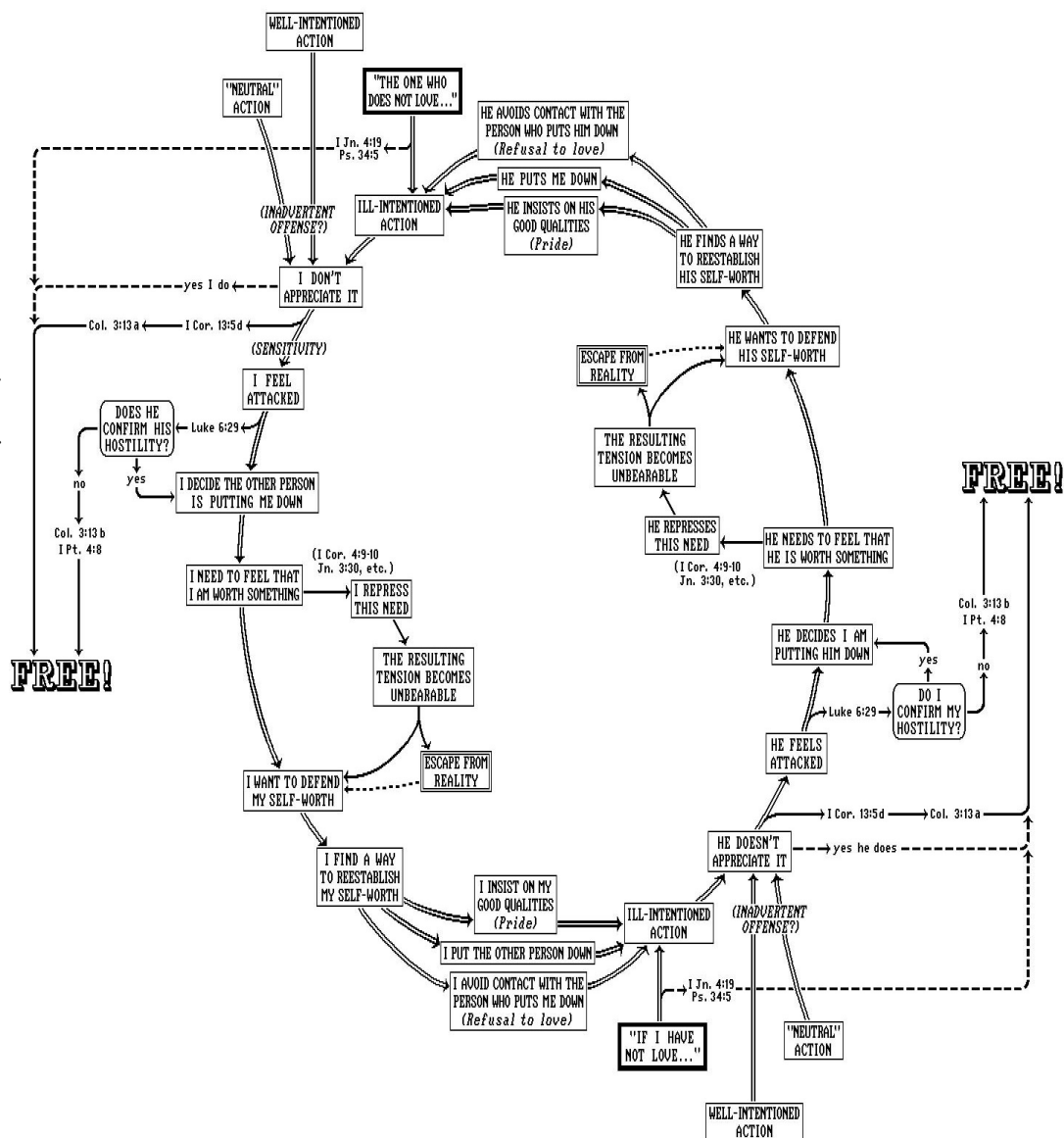


FIGURE 7

cheek" means that you get out of the vicious circle, but "at a disadvantage". The other person may well think (though this is by no means certain) that they actually succeeded in "putting us in our place", in demonstrating that we were wrong and therefore somehow inferior.

This is going to touch our sensitivity. If I have a problem with inferiority, I will have a very hard time with letting the other person have the last word. One way or another, even if it is in a very subtle way, I will desperately want to reestablish my personal self-worth, which has been attacked. This is the biggest reason that it is so hard to put an end to vicious circles this way, even when we know it can and should be done. It is so much easier, and seems to much more satisfying (at the time, anyway) to follow the basic track of the circle, and defend my self-worth. Here, as before, dealing with vicious circles means first of all dealing with my own problems of inferiority.

It must be noted very carefully that the principle of turning the other cheek in no way guarantees an end to the vicious circle. It only makes that possible. When I turn the other cheek, it is up to the other person to react. I am not the one who will determine what happens next.

Perhaps he will stop then and there, and the relationship will straighten up. In fact, though that often seems difficult to believe, that is the most common result. (The difficulty in believing that that might happen, rooted in our sensitivity that absolutely wants to believe that the other person is attacking us, is the primary reason for which so many people refuse to try this possibility of ending quarrels.) Most people simply want peace, and all they ask is that the tensions come to an end. They aren't willing to be the first to stop, because it is so difficult for any of us to accept ending up "one down", but if the other person stops first, they are quite willing to calm down.

If that is what happens, then we can apply the second part of Col. 3:13. The first part tells us to bear with one another, which is the principle that must be applied when the other's behavior does not suit us but there is no real sin involved. The second and larger part of the verse is about forgiveness, though, and applies to those cases where someone really did wrong us. If we say that we are willing to forgive only as long as the other person didn't actually hurt us particularly, we are speaking nonsense. That comes down to saying that we will forgive only when there is no need to forgive (meaning, in those cases where we should simply "bear with one another"). There is forgiveness only when there has been a real offense.

It is true that we will apply the principle of turning the other cheek in some cases where there was not actually an offense. That is the case where the other person was not really attacking us, even though it sure seemed like it. But we will never know it, because if we did know that that was the case, we would simply bear with the other person's unpleasant behavior without feeling attacked by it. In practice, every time we "turn the other cheek", it is because we are actually convinced that someone has deliberately wronged us. Thus, we will treat it as an offense, which means forgiving it instead of simply accepting it as something we should put up with even if we don't like it.

Another principle we are applying in taking this way out of the vicious circle is that of I Pt. 4:8 (which is a quote adapted from Pr. 10:12), "Love covers a multitude of sins." There are a number of different applications of this principle, but one of them is to just ignore the sin in question, to not take it into account in any way. That is what needs to be done here. That doesn't mean it is never appropriate to react to wrongs; we will shortly see when and how that needs to be done. But if we do have to react, that is not a case of turning the other cheek. Turning the other cheek means acting exactly as if nothing had happened, hoping the person will choose to behave correctly on their own. (Or perhaps with God's help, but without me doing anything at all.)

In other words, we forgive (Col. 3:13b) and we forget (I Pt. 4:8). Obviously, that doesn't mean we literally no longer remember what happened. It means we act as if we no longer remembered it. We don't bring it up again, ever. Not with the person who wronged us, not with others, not even with ourselves. In this way, we are free of the vicious circle, free to live in peace.

What if he hits the other cheek?

It may be, though, that the other person really is hostile towards us. When we turn the other cheek, acting as if he had done nothing at all and giving him the possibility to do it again if he so chooses, he takes advantage of the situation to hurt us again. In such a case, we have a clear confirmation that he really does consider us as less than him. We are not just imagining it.

That is not the outcome we hope for, of course. But it does not need to indicate that the situation is hopeless. In fact, the situation is no worse than it would have been if we hadn't given the person a second chance by turning the other cheek. The confirmation of his hostility merely brings us back onto the main track of the vicious circle, which is where we would have been anyway, at the box marked, "I decide the other person is putting me down." There are times when this may be an excessively hasty conclusion (which is why Jesus tells us to give him a second chance before we decide it), but it is not always wrong.

Even in such a case, it was worth trying. The result might not be what you hoped, but you couldn't know that ahead of time. And at the very least, you know exactly where you stand with the other person.

It is important to make sure you really did "turn the other cheek", though. There are plenty of people

who pretend that's what they did, and the other person confirmed his hostility, when that is not at all what actually happened. If you did anything at all to defend your self-worth, even if you thought you were turning the other cheek, you were simply having another go at the vicious circle, that's all. You were down on the bottom of the diagram, finding a way to reestablish your personal worth, and it is entirely to be expected (even if that doesn't make it right) that the other person will respond in kind.

It should be noted that if you have really and truly turned the other cheek, and the other person continues to attack you, then it is permissible to take certain precautions in the future. That does **not** mean that from then on you have the right to attack back, in order to defend your self-worth. But there is nothing wrong with protecting yourself from attack, especially if the situation is serious. Remember that Jesus Himself, when He was attacked too strongly in Judea, withdrew to the other side of the Jordan (Jn. 10:40).

This presents a number of problems, nevertheless. The primary one is that we are extremely likely to convince ourselves (because it's what we want to believe) that we are merely taking justifiable measures to protect ourselves, when in fact we are finding a way to reestablish our self-worth and put the other person down. This is especially likely to happen in the case of withdrawing from contact with the other. One good rule of thumb to apply is that the idea here is not to protect our egos, but to physically protect ourselves from danger. Our ego does not need protecting if we have settled our own problems with inferiority by having our eyes and thoughts focused on God. But it may be necessary to take precautions against a known thief, or bully, or other person who has demonstrated that he will physically hurt those around him.

The other difficulty here is that it is so hard to be sure we have really "turned the other cheek", ever. We fool ourselves easily into thinking that that is what we have done, simply because we did not react to aggression with as much violence as possible. (We have a very marked tendency, as sinners, to think that our behavior is somehow commendable simply because it could have been much worse and wasn't.) If someone hurt us, and we told him off right and then let him know we would "give him a second chance", that does **not** constitute "turning the other cheek". The "telling off" is clearly a continuation of the vicious circle, a way of defending our self-worth and putting the other person in his place. It is only when we have really continued to act in love, despite what we were pretty sure was an attack, when we have not given the other person the slightest indication that their behavior was not appropriate (not even a simple, "I'll pretend I didn't hear that"), and they have continued to act in the same hurtful way, that we can know that it is a general disposition in their mind, and not an isolated action. In that case alone can we know whether it is necessary to take steps to protect ourselves. Otherwise, it may well be that the only thing necessary to end the other person's hostility is to end our own hostility towards him.

The principle of bearing with others, even if their way of acting does not please us (the principle we saw in figure 6), resolves a great deal of situations that otherwise would degenerate into vicious circles. This principle of turning the other cheek (added to the rest in figure 7) allows us to resolve most of the cases that remain. Especially between Christians, it is relatively rare to find someone who really does want to take advantage of others and hurt them for his own benefit. It happens (all those who attend church regularly are not truly born-again believers, transformed by God's love, after all), but it isn't very common. Most of the time, when we think that's what's happening, it is only because we aren't willing to apply the principles that would let us end the vicious circle, because of our sensitivity. But so many unpleasant relationships could be straightened out if we did it!

What to do with those who really are hostile

We need to see, now, what to do with someone who really is against us, someone who has decided to take advantage of us and put us down, if we want to avoid an endless "vicious circle". When we have done all we can to give them the benefit of the doubt, when we have given them a second chance, when we have honestly done the best we can to have a proper attitude by looking to God in order to deal with our own feelings of inferiority, there are some people who are still out to get us, even so.

It might seem that you're just stuck when that happens. We have already seen that there is no way whatsoever to defend your self-worth without fueling the problem. In fact, there is no way to defend your self-worth that is really compatible with Christian faith. The very fact of trying to give yourself worth is the definition of pride, and pride can never, ever flow from Christian love.

But renouncing on our need to be worth something, accepting to believe that we have no value, isn't a solution either, as we have seen. It leads to unbearable tensions, because we just aren't made to think that we are useless and worthless.

It is worth noting that all the solutions we have seen so far come down to the same thing in the end, and that is to realize that the other person isn't actually attacking our self-worth. If that is the case, I don't need to defend my worth, or simply let it be trampled, either. There is no problem with my self-worth. But what do I do when the other person is attacking me?

We would be tempted to think that in that case, we have to choose between the two alternatives we have already seen, defending our self-worth, or accepting the fact that we are worth less than others. But in fact we do not need to choose to between them, for what may seem like an extremely surprising reason: *My self-worth*

is not harmed in any way, even if the other person really is looking down on me!

What, after all, is the true source of what I am worth? In the few thoughts we developed on the subject in the introduction, dealing with the problem of inferiority, we saw that our true worth comes from the fact of being infinitely and unconditionally loved by God. By the price He paid so that we may be His own, He shows that we are important to Him, and thus that we have great worth to Him. This value is not innately "in us" (it is the desire to have an innate worth in and of ourselves, a value that comes from our own abilities and qualities and person, that fuels the vicious circle), but the fact remains that we have infinite value to God. We can never know why He loves us so, but He does.

If my value as a person comes from God's love for me, then the only way that what I am worth can change is if God's love changes. And that will never happen. "'Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed,' says the Lord, who has compassion on you" (Is. 54:10) Even if the whole world falls apart around us, even if everyone is against us, God's love will always be what it has always been. That means that what I am worth, to God, can never vary.

And if my worth is unchanged, then the problem has nothing to do with what I am worth. I neither need to defend my self-worth nor let it be trampled. The principle of defending your self-worth and the principle of accepting that you aren't worth much are both based on the idea that my personal worth can be changed by the actions of those around me. But that is false, and that is what is ultimately wrong with both these methods of dealing with personal conflicts. The pride that makes me want to reestablish my self-worth supposes that I am not worth much, or at least, not worth as much as I should be. And so does the "doormat complex", really. But that is wrong, in both cases. Sure, there may be (and in fact are, as I know for a fact) people who look down on me, people who don't think I am worth too much. But that changes nothing about the real situation. If I am truly convinced of that, then I will not feel put down, or attacked, even if that is precisely what others are attempting to do.

We can have this attitude, however, only if we are consciously and regularly practicing the principles we have already seen, meaning we are looking to God instead of being concerned with ourselves (Ps. 34:5), and loving others because we are sure of God's love for us (I Jn. 4:19). When I know God loves me, when I am content in Him, I can love others instead of putting them down to defend my own self-worth. Anyone who hasn't dealt with this problem, however, will have to choose between playing the game of the vicious circle, or accepting to not be worth much, with all the problems that either one of those two choices involves. But someone who is freed from the tyranny of "self", by understanding God's love, can act in love, even towards those who hurt us. Nobody can change anything about what we are really worth, so we don't ever need to

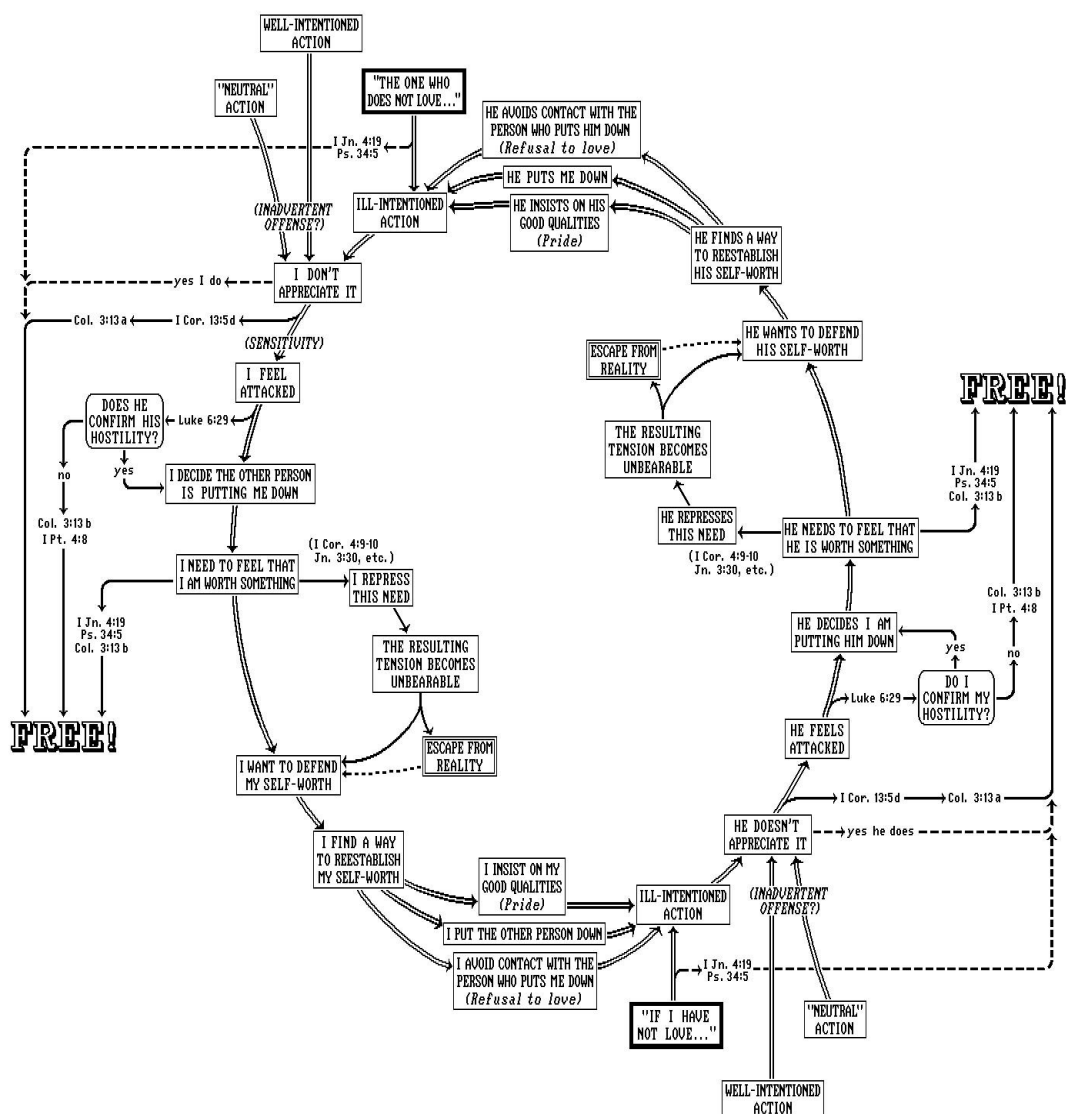


FIGURE 8

That means that we can choose to leave the vicious circle, no matter what the other person's intentions are. This way out is thus added to the rest of the diagram in figure 8. I still need to feel that I am worth something, but that is not a problem because I am worth something. Not because others treat me with respect, but because God loves me. I don't need to worry about defending what I am worth, because that can never, never change.

Here, also, we are applying the principle found in the second half of Col. 3:13, "Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." If we find it hard to forgive, it is because the same old problem of inferiority is still present in us. The refusal to forgive is just one more way of defending your own self-worth, of taking advantage of the opportunity to look down on someone else. When we refuse to forgive, it amounts to deciding that the other one is not good, and therefore that we are better than he is. But when I apply the principles that allow me to overcome my own problems with inferiority, such as Ps. 34:5 and I Jn. 4:19, then I can apply the principle of forgiveness as well. That is why this way out of the vicious circle is marked with all three of these verses in the diagram.

But in all that, I **don't** need to feel that my personal worth has been trampled. The wrong that has been done to me is entirely exterior, in the circumstances in which I find myself, and not interior, in my own person.

S o we've gotten out of the vicious circle. We are no longer trying to put the other person down in any way. We forgive them. All of that is very good. But does that mean that a Christian just lets things happen, no matter how bad they are? Are there no situations where a believer ought to react against injustice?

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made, concerning the proper reaction to the wrong actions of the other. That reaction will vary considerably, according to the circumstances.

But we have to be very careful here. We play games with ourselves very easily. If I choose to intervene, because the other person hurt me, for my own personal good, then I am not out of the vicious circle at all. I don't know how many times I have seen people reprove others "to help them", when it was obvious to a neutral outsider that it was in fact for the good of the person doing the reproving, because he had been hurt. I've done it myself. If I feel that my personal worth has been attacked, then that means that I haven't yet really grasped the principle of worth that comes from being loved by God. I still think that it's what others think of me that makes me worthwhile, and that means that I will still try to force others to have a good opinion of me and treat me with respect.

If it is necessary to intervene when someone has done us (or another) wrong, this must be done for the good of that person, or else for the good of those who could be possible future victims. Penal law, even in the Bible, advocates making a wrongdoer suffer, as punishment for their crimes. That is a lesson to them, and also a lesson to others who would be encouraged to act in the same hurtful way, if they saw that no particularly unpleasant consequences resulted from it. Nevertheless, Jesus teaches very clearly that it is not for the believer to apply such a law himself, in order to defend his own personal worth and "get revenge". That's the idea behind Mt. 5:38-42. We must not think that Jesus is saying that the principles taught in the Old Testament are no longer valid, that God could have come up with something better than that, and that He has a better idea. But He is correcting those who think they can take the law into their own hands, and apply principles of penal law personally. In the very best of circumstances, penal law inevitably involves a fair amount of abuses and injustices. But when "justice" is applied summarily by those who were the victims of the crimes, to defend their own worth, then those abuses are increased to an extreme degree.

If we choose to intervene because of the unjust actions of others, then it must be out of love. Love for the people who do wrong, and love for others. But never, never to get revenge, to get back at those who hurt us. Getting even just means continuing on in the vicious circle.

Four criteria for a positive intervention

The question that is posed when we come out of the vicious circle by this route thus requires very serious consideration: "Is it necessary to help the person with this problem?" I propose four criteria for evaluating this question. An affirmative answer is appropriate only if all four of the criteria are present. Two out of four, or even three out of four, is not enough.

1) The first criterion is simply the principle we have already seen, that we must be very, very sure we are not acting to reestablish our own self-worth, to defend ourselves because we feel put down by the other. This is, in fact, about the most difficult of the four criteria, in terms of making sure it is the case. But there are others.

2) It is only worthwhile to pick up on something that is sufficiently important. That, of course, is a subjective evaluation, and we will never all agree on what "sufficiently important" means, but it needs to be taken into consideration, even so. There is nothing to be gained in getting after someone for every little fault. If we make a big thing out of a very minor problem, the other person is sure to think we are attacking him. And he won't necessarily be wrong, either.

3) The third criterion is that the problem to be dealt with must be something relatively specific. You can't deal concretely with a problem that is not clear.

"You need to change your attitude," someone says. "You have a bad attitude?"

"How so?"

"I don't know. It's hard to say exactly. But you have a bad attitude."

It should be obvious that such an approach to problem-solving will never help anyone. With the best intentions in the world, the person couldn't know how he should change. If we can't point out something specific, we can't do anything useful.

4) Lastly, you need to have a concrete and workable proposition for modifying the troublesome behavior. It is not at all enough to simply point out what is not right, even if it is a major and specific problem. Since the goal (the only goal that makes it valid to intervene) is to help, you have to be able to give a genuine solution. This, in fact, is a very general principle in every type of Christian teaching. If we content ourselves with denouncing "sin" and saying what is wrong, we will only be able to help those who have enough spiritual maturity to find the solutions themselves. And in the vast majority of cases, those are not the ones who have the really serious problems. A good teacher and helper is not just someone who recognizes a problem when he sees it. It is also someone who has a practical solution to propose, in order to help the person overcome their problem.

When you don't intervene

If any one of these four criteria are not present, it seems to me that we don't really have any choice in the situation. For one reason or another (depending on which one is missing), we will not be able to do anything useful in trying to help. And if we can't do any good, then we cannot act in love, because love always seeks to do good.

If that is the case, then even though the wrong is worse than in the situation where we could have "turned the other cheek", we are still reduced to applying the principle of I Pt. 4:8: "Love covers a multitude of sins." Note that it is very clearly a question of sins. We are not talking here about overlooking character traits that don't happen to suit us. Those, we put in the category of situations covered by the principle of "bearing with one another". Here, we are talking about sin. But there are times when it is possible, and appropriate, to overlook even sin.

That is not always the ideal solution. There are many cases where it would be better if the problem could really be dealt with. Better for all concerned, including the one in the wrong. But if we cannot act in love, if the problem is not serious enough or clear enough, or if we don't have any practical suggestions on how to deal with the situation, then we don't really have much of a choice. The problem will just have to stay there, for the time being at least. We can hope, for the person, that it will be dealt with one day, but for now we can only "cover a multitude of sins". At the very least, that puts an end to the vicious circle. It might start up again, since the problem that makes the person act the way they do is still there, but if it does it can be dealt with the same way, until some deeper solution becomes possible.

Restoration in love

There are situations where it would not be appropriate, however, to overlook what is wrong. Consider the case of someone who knows that his (or her) spouse beats the children violently. To do nothing about it under the pretense that "love covers a multitude of sins" would **not** be an attitude of love for the children who are being abused. What's more, a person who knows that children are being violently abused and who does nothing about it is even guilty before the law in most Western countries, considered in one way or another as an accomplice to the fact. That is a serious situation.

In the example just cited, the four criteria mentioned are easily enough seen to be present. We intervene for the protection of the children, and not for personal vengeance. The problem is quite obviously serious enough, and specific enough, that it can be identified without difficulty. As for finding a solution, there is always something that can be done. If nothing else, legal authorities can be informed, even if that will cost a lot as far as the family is concerned. But this is a case where it is imperative to intervene. Love and forgiveness must still be present, but the problem absolutely must be dealt with.

Such a blatant problem is by no means the only case where it is appropriate to react, however. This example is merely intended as an irrefutable demonstration of the fact that even the most perfect Christian love does not simply overlook all the wrongs that go on around us. Any time that all four of the above-mentioned criteria are present, it is appropriate to intervene in order to help the person with his problem. In doing so, we are applying the principle of Gal. 6:1, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted" (NASB, which seems to me to follow the most faithfully the intent of the original text). This is by no means the only passage that teaches this principle, but it does a good job of bringing out the essential points involved.

Paul's teaching here does not contradict the idea of love that covers a multitude of sins. These are different contexts. No matter what the situation, the Christian is called on to act in love, the genuine divine love that seeks the good of the other. But knowing whether that love means that it is better to "forgive and forget" or if it is needful to "restore the brother" requires discernment. It would be just as wrong to set in motion a whole process of restoration for a minor problem, as to overlook the behavior of someone who is really hurting himself and others.

As we have said so many times, we must not act in order to defend our own self-worth. But that does not mean it is not appropriate to act in order to defend what is right. There are those who have neglected this distinction, and who teach that a Christian must never defend himself, by any means, in whatever situation. That is false. There were times in Paul's ministry when he defended himself (see Acts 16:35-40 and 22:24-28 for example), just as Jesus also did in the passage to which we have already referred (Jn. 10:31-39). We never see Jesus defending Himself because His personal worth has been attacked, but He does not hesitate to respond to injustice, even at times when He Himself was the victim of that injustice.

If we are really convinced that the four criteria for intervening are all satisfied (especially the first one, the one about which we fool ourselves the most, pretending we are acting for the good of the other person when in reality we are trying to reestablish our own self-worth), we still are not free to act any way we want. Gal 6:1 gives us a number of important principles, and it is important to apply them if we want to have the best possible chances of success.

Note first of all that the passage gives this task to "you who are spiritual". In chapter 5, Paul had described in a fair amount of detail the difference between the character and motivation of those who live according to the flesh (and whose lives are thus marked by the works of the flesh), and those who live according to the Spirit (and whose lives demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit). The person who lives according to the flesh seeks primarily his own well-being; the fruit of the Spirit is first and foremost **love**. That means seeking the good of others.

Paul is telling us, then, that it is only those who have been freed from this need to defend their own self-worth who are called on to "restore the brother". This of course implies the first of our four criteria. If you point out someone else's wrongs in order to make yourself look good and defend your own self-worth (even if that is only part of your motivation), you are wrong in doing so. Even if the accusations you have towards him are perfectly valid. The person who is unable to genuinely seek the good of others, the person who knows in his heart that he will simply be trying to put down the one in the wrong if he says something, has no choice here. Gal. 6:1 is not addressed to him, at least not at this time and in this situation. If he wants to act according to what the Bible teaches, he can only apply Peter's teaching, "Love covers a multitude of sins." Even if there is a genuine need to reestablish the one who has done wrong, for himself or for others, the task is not given to those who cannot do it in love. This responsibility must be entrusted to those who (perhaps because they have not been personally attacked in the problem) can do it in genuine love, those "who are spiritual."

Paul also encourages us to do this with as much **gentleness** as possible. It is important to realize that if you have to reprove someone, you are necessarily dealing with a person whose reactions are not always right. Tearing him down brutally "for his own good" will merely provoke even more sinful behavior than before, and thus make it necessary to take even more severe measures further on. This is not love. Many long and painful confrontations could have been avoided if, from the very start, those who had to reprimand someone because of his sin had known how to do it more gently.

That does not mean that we should avoid the truth, to "protect" the one who is wrong. It is in love that we are called on to **speak the truth** (see Eph. 4:15), but we still must speak the truth. Gentleness means that we do not purposely seek to hurt the person; it does not mean that the other person will always appreciate or take well what we have to say. Some corrections hurt, no matter how careful we are. But we still must be as considerate as possible, to limit these hurts as much as possible.

When Paul adds, "looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted," it is the same considerations that are in view. I do not think he is saying that if we try to help someone with their problem we are likely to fall into the same temptation, as some translations of the verse would indicate. It is true that that happens, but it is pretty rare. It seems instead to me that Paul is warning us that the next time the situation might be turned around. Maybe, having helped restore a wandering brother, you will need to restore yourself some day. There is a great chance that "with the measure you use, it will be measured to you", as Jesus said in Luke 6:38. If you restored others in a spirit of gentleness, in a tactful and encouraging way, then others will most likely act that way towards you. But if you went at it in a brutal, accusing way, others might be tempted to take the chance to get even with you for having hurt others in the past. Sure, such a way of acting does not come from the Holy Spirit, but it happens. It is better to take the precautions that are necessary to reduce the chances of it happening to you.

How will he respond?

Every time we think it appropriate to attempt to restore someone who is sinning, we must be aware of the warning of Heb. 12:11: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." It is pretty much unavoidable that at first, anyway, the person who must be corrected will not appreciate our intervention. Even when you are as gentle as possible, even when the goal is really and truly to help the person instead of trying to make yourself look good by putting him down, even when you go at it in just the right way, it is very likely that the person will take it wrongly. Very few of us like admitting our sin. Some people refuse systematically to admit it when they sin; it's always somebody else's fault. We are likely to be in for some unpleasant surprises, unless we are prepared ahead of time to face the hyper-sensitivity of those who are acting sinfully. It is too naive to think that all we need to do is confront the sinner with what is wrong, and he will straighten everything out. It rarely works out so nicely.

If the person accepts the correction (perhaps after an initial reaction that was not really what it should have been), that will put an end to the vicious circle. But this could take some time. It might be weeks or even months until the person can see the wisdom of your intervention and appreciate your correction. It hurts to be reprimanded, no matter how gently. It hurts to admit we were wrong. But when things do get straightened out, it will be seen that it was worth the trouble, even though things might have been tense for a while. James 5:19-20, quoting the same passage as Peter in I Pt. 4:8, tells us that bringing a sinner back from his error is also a way of "covering a multitude of sins".

Unfortunately, however, there are times when the person's reaction against being corrected is so strong that he or she simply refuses the wisdom of the correction, and instead takes it as another personal attack.

Remember that the epistle to the Hebrews is addressed to people who were tempted to turn away from God because of the difficulties He allowed in their lives, for their good. If sinners can react so adversely to the perfect, wise, and loving corrections of God, they are even more likely to do so because of the necessarily imperfect corrections of men.

When that happens, the person will immediately bring the relationship back into the vicious circle. Refusing to be corrected, he will not appreciate it, will take it as an attack, and so on. The vicious circle is operating again, at least on his side. What happens is that the intervention, intended to help him overcome his sin, is a well-intentioned action that he does not appreciate. As we have seen, that happens. It can even happen on occasions when we did just what we should have done. And if we were clumsy or brutal in the way we went at it, that is even more likely to happen.

All that means is that we need to apply anew all the same principles we have already applied, and get out of the vicious circle once again. (The fact that the other person started it off again when we had done what we should is not an excuse for the sinful reaction of attacking back.) We need to remind ourselves again of God's love for us, make sure we are preoccupied with Him instead of with ourselves, act in love toward the one who did us wrong, and stop the cycle once again, by forgiving and refusing to try to defend a self-worth that isn't even affected by how the other person acts.

It may be necessary to do this several times before the correction will finally be accepted, but such perseverance will often permit us to "win a brother", as Mt. 18:15 says. Being reproved will always be painful, but if the person really wants to walk with God, after the sorrow, he will let himself be corrected by the Word of God. (This is the principle that is talked about in II Cor. 7:8-10. But even that did not put an end to the problems. It seems fairly likely that the severe criticisms that the Corinthians had about Paul, which were one of the primary reasons for which he wrote II Corinthians, were provoked at least partially by the reproaches he made to them in I Corinthians. Those reproaches were perfectly justified, but the Corinthian believers still didn't appreciate them much, at least not at first.)

The "worst case scenario" is that no matter how many times we try to help someone overcome his sin, we realize that he simply refuses to deal with it. I have known such cases. (Though they are, fortunately, very rare.) After several attempts to help someone realize that his actions, words, or attitudes are marked by sin, if he makes it very clear that he does not want to accept that, that he does not want to change, and that he will take any future attempts to help him as attacks, we are forced to the conclusion that the fourth criterion for intervention simply is not present, though we might have thought it was: We do not have any useful way to restore the person.

In such a stalemate, the choices are rather limited. If the problem is serious enough, that means we are in the context of what is commonly called "church discipline". That means that when the person absolutely refuses to repent, then the church must cut him off from fellowship. This is the only case where avoiding contact with someone is appropriate. If it is done to protect our own self-worth, because we don't like being "attacked", then we are just as wrong as he is. But doing it for the good of the person, if the situation is serious enough that it is appropriate, is not only permitted but commanded by God. This may be a final attempt to make someone who pretends to be a Christian but obviously isn't understand that we will not encourage his sin by pretending to be in fellowship with him. Being in fellowship means being in agreement as far as the really important foundations of Christian truth are concerned, and if a person's life really isn't right, that is not the case.

In such a case, and as long as the person does not repent, there is unfortunately a sort of "perpetual vicious circle" concerning him. You can be very sure that the person constantly takes our cutting off fellowship with him as an attack. And the church that takes such a measure is constantly applying a correction (which is not being taken well). This amounts to a failure, for all persons concerned, but there are times when nothing else is appropriate.

There are cases, however, where the person really should be brought back from their error, and refuses to let themselves be corrected, but where that does not mean that fellowship should be cut off. The problem may be real, and important, but it still is not fundamental to the Christian faith, or seriously damaging to the testimony of the church. In such a case, after several attempts to restore the person, all we can do is give up on it. The only principle we can apply is "love covers a multitude of sins", even though it would be much better for the person if they turned from this sin. This is not an ideal end to the problem, but at least it puts an end to the vicious circle. The person will continue in his sinful behavior, but we simply put up with it, through love, knowing that we do not have any way to deal with it.

It is important to realize, though, that such a complete failure to restore someone who has fallen into sin is relatively rare. Fortunately. There are usually ways to calm things down before the relationship comes to a total stalemate. The biggest danger, in fact, is that very often we want such a stalemate, not only to be done with the conflict, but also to prove that we were right in our opinion of the other person. It is very tempting to try to convince ourselves that we have tried everything and that the other one is too stupid, or too sinful (or both), to accept our help. We then decide, much too rapidly, that the only solution is to avoid them. But the person who goes at solving conflicts this way is not on any of the tracks that we added to our overall diagram in figure 9. He is busy trying to defend his own self-worth, on the original path of the vicious circle.

In reality, as has already been said, the vast majority of tensions of the kind represented in the "vicious circle of hostility" diagram can be solved quite quickly, if only we will apply the principles that the Word of God teaches about personal relationships. Bearing with the unpleasant behavior of those we don't happen to like, and turning the other cheek when there truly seems to have been an attack, will solve almost every last one of these conflicts. That way, we don't need to wonder if we ought to intervene, and how, to correct the person, or worry about whether or not the person will take it well if we do. God gives us very wise principles that allow us to end almost all quarrels long before they get that far.

CONCLUSION

These principles allow us to really put Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:27-38 into practice. Supposing that we really want to, of course. If someone refuses to give up his carnal desire to protect his own self-worth, he is pretty much condemned to live with such tensions, regularly. But anyone who wants to follow Jesus' teaching will discover that it works. Which is not surprising, of course. Jesus know very well what He was talking about, because He is the one who made us. When He tells us to put an end to these vicious circles, He knows it can be done. What really counts is to have our eyes solidly fixed on Him, so that we can truly act in love.

Figure 9 shows all these principles together in one diagram. As we said at the beginning, it's pretty complicated, because personal relationships are complicated. (In fact, figure 9 is actually simplified a great deal, compared with the reality of the situation!) A few remarks about the overall diagram will perhaps help us to get a good, overall grasp of it.

1) First of all, note that there are really only two major principles in the whole thing. The vicious circle itself, as well as those paths inside it, represent the idea that our value comes from ourselves, or from what others think of us. This concept causes us nothing but trouble. All those paths that lead out of the vicious circle, however, represent the second major principle involved, that of love. Such love comes from the fact of knowing we are loved by God, and having our eyes on Him. Even if we don't grasp all the details of the vicious circle, just understanding that much will help us overcome a lot of problems. "Those who look to Him are radiant," and they avoid a lot of troubles for themselves and others, as well.

2) There is a second important principle about this whole mechanism implied in the difference between the two motivations represented on the diagram. It is a principle that I have developed elsewhere in a fair amount of detail, but which should be considered here as well, at least briefly. It can be stated simply: "When you bump a jar, what comes out is what was inside." This principle, which seems so ridiculously obvious in its literal application, means that when a person is "bumped" by the difficulties around him, he will react according to the fundamental disposition of his heart. In other words, our bad reactions are not caused by the circumstances around us, but only brought to the surface by them.

In the vicious circle, that means that the real problem, for both of the people involved, is not so much with the other person as it is with themselves. The "attacks" of the other person, even when they really are attacks (which is not always the case, as we have seen), are not the real cause of the tensions. The real root problem, that causes each one to continue the game of getting even and hitting back instead of putting into practice the things that Jesus taught, is the attitude of the heart. When each one wants to establish his own self-worth, when they have not let God's love free them from this carnal tendency to be preoccupied with themselves, then the problems will go on and on. It hurts to admit that the real problem is inside us, in our own attitude towards ourselves, instead of outside of us, with the other person. But that will be very useful in understanding the overall principles involved in the mechanism of the vicious circle, and in knowing how to get out of it.

3) Note that the diagram is perfectly symmetrical. That means that either one of the persons involved can choose to end the vicious circle. There is no need for both of them to agree on a solution, in order to end it. If one person really decides to stop playing these games, then the one who keeps on with it will go on being unhappy (because the real problems are inside him), but the one who wants to end it will be free even so. There is of course a very great likelihood that anyone who chooses to put an end to it will encourage the other one to change his attitudes as well, but even if it doesn't work out that way, at least he will overcome the bitterness in his own heart that is tearing him apart from inside.

This symmetry is important. It means that "it's always up to you." It's too easy to pretend that the problem will end as soon as the other person changes. That's not the solution, but the very principle that fuels the vicious circle. The solution comes from choosing to be the first one to put into practice what the Bible teaches about personal relationships.

4) It is worth noting that the circle is like a kind of toll road. It's easy to get on, but it costs to get off. It's tempting to let the exits go on by, because it would cost to get off there. Bearing with the attitudes and actions of others, when it's not what we like, costs us. Turning the other cheek costs even more. Forgiving and seeking to help even when the other person really is against us costs more yet. And each time you go around, the cost will be greater still, because the problems are even more deeply rooted. The further I go on

acting in pride, refusing to let the other person do or say things that seem to put me down, the more it's going to hurt to set my pride aside and admit that I, too, have been acting in sin (even if my criticisms about the other person were perfectly justified), ask God to forgive me, and take the steps that are necessary to solve the problem.

But just like with a toll road, sooner or later you have to pay. Putting off taking an exit just means it will cost more further on. And if I never choose to get off, I will pay the highest possible price: the total loss of the relationship with the other person, as well as the bitterness inside of me that goes along with my heart's disposition. So even if it costs, it's better to get off as quickly as possible. It will still cost less than further on.

Let's try to really grasp these principles, the causes of the problem as well as the solutions. We can apply them for ourselves, and teach them to those around us. As we do this, we will be much better off, and God will be glorified in our lives.