

## How to Talk with Someone about Sin



by EDWARD T. WELCH \_\_\_\_\_

You are about to read an excerpt from *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love*.<sup>1</sup> This book identifies the skills we need to help one another. It is for everyone—friends, parents, neighbors. God is pleased to use ordinary people, ordinary conversations, and extraordinary and wise love to do most of the heavy lifting in his kingdom.

We are meant to live this way. We are meant to walk side by side, an interdependent body of weak people. God is pleased to grow and change us through the help of people who have been re-created in Christ and empowered by the Spirit.

That is how life in the church works.

And yet fear enters in. We are afraid to jump into the complexities of someone's life. Who are we to help someone else? Our past makes a mess of the present. Sin always threatens to overtake us. We feel broken ourselves and fear we will only make things worse for others. We feel unqualified.

So I am writing for people like me, who are willing to move toward other struggling people but are not confident that they can say or do anything very helpful. If you feel quite weak and ordinary—if you feel like a mess but have

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted and adapted from the forthcoming book, *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love*, by Ed Welch ©2015. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.com](http://www.crossway.com).

the Spirit—you have the right credentials. You are one of the ordinary people God uses to help others.

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This portion of the book is about how to talk to people about their sin—a very difficult but important task. First we will consider how to prepare ourselves to talk about sin and then we will get specific about how to actually offer this help.

## Prepare to Talk about Sin

Talking together about sin tends to be the last thing we want to do. Who wants to talk about sin among friends? Suffering, yes. We can even see ourselves highlighting Satan’s pernicious ways when someone is suffering. But to talk about sin? That seems so risky, so judgmental. When sin surfaces in another, we would much rather be silent and secretly judgmental than talk about it. We adopt a don’t-ask/don’t-tell policy, which avoids conflict and also protects us from being accused of sin ourselves.

Addressing sin is a tough one. How can we talk about sin with one another? Our church culture inadvertently communicates that preachers can talk publicly about sin, and a men’s group convened to deal with pornography can talk about it, but as a general rule, it is impolite to talk about sin one on one.

The writer of Hebrews gives us a natural segue from suffering to sin. He just assumes that normal human beings have sin that clings, and hardships are a time when that clinging is even more apparent (Heb 12:1–2). He doesn’t wag a finger.

He just makes a basic observation.

But it is still hard.

To begin, we will consider *why* we talk about sin and then we will consider *how to prepare* ourselves for these conversations.

### Why Bother?

Suffering and sin are the sum of human struggles. This means that we need one another in our struggle with suffering and in our struggle with sin and temptation.

James wrote his final words on these very matters:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19–20)

“Save his soul from death” and potentially head off a future avalanche of sin—no one uses that kind of language with suffering. Suffering hurts more, but sin is more serious. Suffering will not last, but sin has consequences that reach into eternity.

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In other words, when we put sin off limits, we cannot defend ourselves as being polite people who merely avoid meddling. Rather, we are like those who, during a leisurely walk, avoid eye contact with the dying person we almost trip over. We are neglecting matters of life and death.

But it is still hard. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well:

The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare

not be sinners. . . . The fact is that we are all sinners!<sup>2</sup>

If we ignore our brothers’ and sisters’ sins, we have sinned against them, and we should ask their forgiveness. We need to move toward fellow sinners. We are family after all, and we know the perilous nature of a life apart from God.

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### **Examine Yourself First**

To prepare ourselves to talk to people about sin, we look to grow in humility and patience. We’ll start with humility.

**Humility.** Humility means that we already see our sins as worse than others’ sins, so we have no reason to defend ourselves when someone points them out (Matt 7:2–5). This does not mean we must publicly identify our own sins before we talk about sins in others. It means that we live as redeemed tax collectors (Luke 18:9–14) who have no confidence in our own righteousness but live because of God’s lavish forgiveness and grace. Humility might be tested when you talk about someone’s sin.

The confronted person might say:

“Aren’t you holier-than-thou!”

“Oh, and you have never done that?”

“Who are you to talk to me about such things?”

We can never predict someone’s responses. Anger and defensiveness can come when we least expect it. In response, humility has nothing to defend: “It’s funny you should say that I should look at myself first. I have actually spent time doing that, and I saw that my own heart is a good bit uglier than I thought. And I really am open to you talking about my sins. We can do that now. Then we can go back to what I was talking about earlier. I am trying to care for you in a way that I would want to be cared for.”

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 112.

Or here is another example of what you could say: “Am I saying things that are wrong or offensive?”

Humility is surprisingly sturdy in the face of anger. It includes a willingness to look at our own sins yet isn’t diverted from our concern for another.

**Patience.** Patience is humility’s partner. It is one of the identified fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), and it is a central feature of love (1 Cor 13:4), so it is essential to our ability to be helpful. It means that the one we are speaking with is like us—he does not respond perfectly, he changes slowly, and he needs a patient helper. There are times, though, when patience is not the best course. Sometimes we act immediately because someone is in physical danger. If we hear of a child abused or a wife threatened, we have to do something, and the first step is to get help from the larger community. More often, however, sin is a danger to the sinner more than it is to other people, and patience is the order of the day.

“I was thinking about our conversation last week. I know I brought up something that was hard and isn’t easy to face. Could we talk about that?”

Patience does not think, “If I were her, I would be working harder on this.” Patience is interested in what direction people face. Do they face toward Jesus? Patience is more interested in direction and less interested in how fast people are changing.

A simple way to keep track of your humility and patience is to check for your own anger and its many variations, such as low-level frustration. When anger is present, humility and patience are absent.

**See the Good and the Hard—First**

When we talk to someone about his or her sins, it is, indeed, risky. What we hope to do is minimize the relational risks through love and wisdom. As a general rule, we can do that if we aim to see the good in others and their hard circumstances before we see the bad. That seems wise, and it fits the style of the apostle Paul's letters.

*See the good.* Have you ever pointed out the facets of the character of God you see in someone? We tend to be slow to do that, and if we are considering how to talk to someone about sin, those good words are even less likely to come up.

You might be wise to postpone any talk about sin until you have spoken words that build up (though talking about sin, done well, should certainly build up). This is a good policy with family and others we live with.

Be careful though. Most of us don't need justification for postponing a conversation about sinful actions. Sometimes we should speak sooner about sin rather than later. When uncertain, keep in mind that the aim is to speak respectfully,

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