

HANDLE SLANDER IN A CHRIST-LIKE WAY

12 Then Miriam and Aaron began to speak against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married—for he had married a Cushite woman. ²They said, “Has Jehovah spoken only through Moses? Has he not also spoken through us?” And Jehovah heard [what they were saying]. ³Now Moses was a very meek man, meeker than anyone else on the face of the earth.

⁴Suddenly Jehovah spoke to Moses and Aaron and Miriam, “Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you!” So the three of them came out. ⁵Then Jehovah came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the door of the Tent of Meeting. He summoned Aaron and Miriam, and they both stepped forward. ⁶He said to them, “Listen to my words: When there is a prophet among you, I, Jehovah, will reveal myself to him in a vision, I will speak with him in a dream. ⁷But this is not the case with my servant Moses, he is faithful in all my house. ⁸With him I will speak [face to face], plainly and not in riddles; and he shall see the form of Jehovah. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” ⁹The anger of Jehovah was aroused against them and he departed [from them.]

¹⁰When the cloud was lifted from over the Tent, there stood Miriam—leprous, as [white as] snow. Aaron looked at Miriam and saw that she had leprosy. ¹¹Then Aaron said to Moses, “O my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. ¹²Do not let her be like a stillborn infant that comes from his mother’s womb with his flesh half eaten away.” ¹³So Moses cried out to Jehovah, “O God, I beg you, please heal her.” ¹⁴Jehovah replied to Moses, “If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Let her be confined outside the camp for seven days; after that she shall be brought back again.” ¹⁵So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not [break camp] until Miriam was brought back again. ¹⁶After [this incident,] the people left Hazeroth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran. (Num. 12:1-16)

Introduction

Upon first meeting her, many people come away with the impression that she is the “Ice Princess.” Nora is a striking blond in her mid-fifties, her makeup is perfect, her clothes are stunning. She looks much more like she’s going to a fashionable cocktail party than to church.

But if you were to visit a particular Dutch Reformed Church in northern New Jersey you would meet Nora. You might mistake her for a Hollywood movie star as she arrives in her white Cadillac. If you are personally introduced to her you would find her to be very reserved, almost aloof, and you would probably come away with the wrong impression. You might be tempted to think to yourself, or maybe even comment to a friend, “What is she doing here?”

But if you judge Nora to be a Sunday hypocrite—the high society kind, the kind that loves to flaunt their elegance and even think they can buy their way into heaven by

contributing a substantial donation to the offering plate—you are very wrong. You might not realize it by looking at her or speaking with her, but Nora is one of the most compassionate and daring Christians you might ever meet. She is the coordinator of the local Hotline for the Homeless in Paterson, N.J. It is not uncommon for Nora to get into her white Cadillac, leave her elegant home in the wealthy suburbs, drive down into the slums of center city Paterson in the middle of the night, and personally pick up a homeless person, escorting them to the local shelter for food and a bed.

Upon first meeting Nora you would never guess her nightlife. You would probably draw a completely false impression about her. You might even be tempted to slander her in your own mind and maybe to a friend. What if you were in Nora's place? What if you were misunderstood? What if you were slandered? How would you handle it?

When we find ourselves to be the subject of misunderstanding or slander, we tend to react with vindictiveness or self-justification. But we should react in a Christ-like way. Consider the case of Moses as he found himself to be the subject of misunderstanding and slander; he handled it in a Christ-like way. As we study this passage of Scripture, may we follow the example of Moses and learn to handle slander in a Christ-like way.

I. Handle Slander in a Christ-like Way, No Matter What the Circumstances

Here in Numbers 12 we find evil accusations being brought against Moses by his own brother and sister. According to verse 1, Aaron and Miriam spoke against Moses because he had married a Cushite (Ethiopian) woman. They make no charge of immoral conduct against Moses for taking this woman to be his wife—apparently Zipporah had died; no further mention is made of her and she must have been in her eighties as was Moses himself. Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses simply because he has chosen to marry a foreigner—a woman who was not born within the Israelite community.

Notice that in verse 2 we overhear Miriam and Aaron asking the rhetorical question, *“Has Jehovah spoken only through Moses? Has he not also spoken through us?”* Indeed, Miriam was a prophetess, as we learn from Exodus 15:20, *“Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing,”* and Aaron had received the instruments of divination: *“put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastplate, so they may be over Aaron’s heart whenever he enters the presence of Jehovah”* (Ex. 28:30.) But Moses was God’s main representative, the one with whom the LORD spoke face to face (vs. 8.)

What does Miriam and Aaron’s question in verse 2 have to do with their criticism spoken in verse 1? Apparently, they viewed Moses’ marriage to this Cushite

woman as an act of arrogance. Who does Moses think he is? He must think that he has a special relationship to God that permits him to do anything he desires!

This criticism must have been especially difficult for Moses to handle; it must have cut him very deeply. It came from fellow believers, not from the foreigners who had become mingled among the people of God (Num. 11:4.) It was made by his own sister and brother. They were a part of his family and played an integral part in his life ever since he was born. They should have been there to support him; they should have known him well enough to not misinterpret his actions. It arose from a complete misunderstanding. Moses had no ulterior motives, he was not trying to get away with something, he was not doing anything wrong. Moses had never taken advantage of his position or misused his God-given authority; on the contrary, he had always used his position to intercede for Israel and for Aaron:

The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. Now I will go up to Jehovah, perhaps I will be able to make atonement for your sin. (Ex. 32:30)

Jehovah was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron. (Deut. 9:20)

Then, too, it was an unjustified attack on his character. Here is the meekest of men (vs. 3) being accused of arrogance. It was an attack apparently motivated by the evil attributes of envy and jealousy and expressing itself in a form of racism—the Cushite woman was of a different race from that of the Israelites.

Can you identify with Moses? Have you ever been the subject of an unjustified criticism or slander that cut very deeply? Perhaps it came from fellow believers. Perhaps it came from your own brothers or sisters. Perhaps it arose from a misunderstanding. Perhaps it was an unjustified attack on your character. Perhaps it was an attack motivated by ungodly attitudes, attitudes totally unworthy of Christian people.

Despite the circumstances and the source of the slander, Moses responded in a Christ-like manner, and by the grace of God we must do the same.

II. Handle Slander in a Christ-like Way, by Trusting the LORD to Intervene

When Miriam and Aaron spoke against him, and harbored false accusations against him, Moses did not react with self-righteous indignation. He did not loudly protest and claim his innocence. He did not go to great lengths to explain and justify his actions. He did not demand that a public apology be made to him.

What did he do? We are told that Moses was very meek. What does that mean? He kept quiet and trusted the LORD to address the matter. He did not take matters into his own hands, he put them into the LORD's hands and left them with God.

Notice that in between Miriam and Aaron's accusation and the statement about Moses' meekness there is a brief and quiet little sentence: "*Jehovah heard [what they were saying]*" (vs. 2b.) Moses knew the LORD was listening, Moses knew the LORD knew the truth of the matter. Moses knew the LORD would act as He saw fit—and He did. The LORD suddenly summoned Moses, Aaron and Miriam to appear before Him (vs. 4.) Moses is exonerated and exalted (vs. 5-8.) He is called a faithful servant (vs. 7.) The LORD declares that He will speak with Moses face to face, the text literally reads, "*mouth to mouth*" (vs. 8.) Miriam, the instigator of this slander, is ostracized and put to shame. She is struck with the plague of leprosy that requires that she be removed from the camp. To her shame, the whole congregation must wait seven days for her restoration before they proceed on their journey (vs. 9-15.)

Handle slander in a Christ-like way, by trusting the LORD to intervene. The Apostle Peter speaks of a Christian enduring wrongful treatment with a consciousness of God: "*It is commendable if a man endures the pain of unjust suffering because of his consciousness of God*" (1 Pet. 2:19.)

"*A consciousness of God*" means the awareness that God is attentive, as was true in the very case of Moses, "*They said, 'Has Jehovah spoken only through Moses? Has he not also spoken through us?' And Jehovah heard [what they were saying]*" (Num.12:2.) It also means being aware of the fact that God is concerned: "*humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God ... ⁷by casting all your cares upon him, because he cares for you*" (1 Pet. 5:7.)

Furthermore, it includes the awareness that God is in control. Note David's perspective, when he was being cursed by Shemei: "*Leave him alone; let him curse, for Jehovah has told him to do so. ¹²It may be that Jehovah will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today*" (2 Sam. 16:11-12.) David was acknowledging the fact that the LORD is in charge and the LORD will take care of the matter. Note Joseph's perspective, when confronting his brothers with their sin: "*As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, namely, the saving of many lives*" (Gen.50:20.) Joseph was acknowledging the fact that God can take what men intend for evil and from it produce blessing. Note Paul's perspective, when he learned that some men were preaching the gospel with the ulterior motive of seeking to add to his affliction: "*I know that, through your prayers and the help provided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the result of all this will be my deliverance. ²⁰This is in keeping with my heart-felt expectation and hope that in no circumstance will I be put to shame; on the contrary, I have all confidence that as always, so now also, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death*" (Phil.1:19-20.)

Paul was acknowledging the fact that God can use even the worst of things for the furtherance of our salvation.

Peter calls us to follow Christ's example:

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example with the intention that you should follow in his footsteps. ²²He committed no sin, neither was any deceit found in his mouth. ²³When they insulted him, he did not insult them; when he suffered, he did not threaten; rather, he committed himself to him who judges righteously. (1 Pet. 2:21-23)

Although He experienced the most awful form of abusive treatment, our Lord did not retaliate in kind. On the contrary, He placed Himself and His cause into the hands of His heavenly Father, the true and only Judge. Note: Matthew 26:45 reports that Jesus was "*handed over*" (παραδιδωμι) to sinners; while Peter reports that Jesus "*handed Himself over*" (παραδιδωμι) to God His Father. By the grace of God, we are to do the same.

III. Handle Slander in a Christ-like Way, By Being Ready to Extend Forgiveness

When Aaron witnesses the LORD's indignation and the fact that Miriam has become leprous, he confesses, "*we have done foolishly ... we have sinned*" (vs. 11.) In response to Aaron's confession and his plea for Miriam, Moses intercedes with the LORD on her behalf (vs. 13.)

It is significant that as Peter exhorts us to imitate the way Christ handled unjust treatment, he also reminds us that Christ our Lord died for our sins,

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to our sins, we might live for righteousness—by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵You, like sheep, were going astray, but now you have been returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:24-25)

Even when we find ourselves to be the subject of slander and unjust treatment, we must be conscious of our own lack of perfect innocence. The temptation to react to unjust treatment with a self-righteous and judgmental spirit must be tempered by the sobering awareness of our own sins and short-comings. David's forbearance with Shimei (referred to earlier) may have been due to the consciousness of his own past sins. Shimei wrongfully called David a man of blood with regard to the defeat of the house of Saul. But David may have remembered the blood he wrongfully shed in the episode involving the murder of Uriah when David had him put to death in battle so that he might marry his widowed wife, Bathsheba.

We must handle slander in a Christ-like way, by be ready to extend forgiveness:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Col. 3:12-13)

Conclusion

If you met Nora, there is a good chance that, based on first impressions, you would misjudge her and maybe even slander her. That very thing happened to Moses. His own brother and sister grossly misinterpreted his action and wrongfully condemned him.

At one time or another the same thing may happen to you. If and when it does, do not react with vindictiveness or self-righteous indignation or personal justification. On the contrary, like Moses, handle slander in a Christ-like way by God's grace and to His glory.