

CHAPTER 14

HANDLING THE WICKED IN THE CONTEXT OF A CHURCH – PART ONE

¹³ *“For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,
And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water.
Jeremiah 2:13 (NKJV)*

*“For my people are foolish,
they know me not;
they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
but how to do good they know not.”
Jeremiah 4:22 (RSV)*

⁹ *I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; ¹⁰ not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But rather I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Drive out the wicked person from among you.”
1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (RSV)*

*Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?
No, they were not at all ashamed;
they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among the fallen;
when I punish them, they shall be overthrown,
says the Lord.*

Jeremiah 8:12 (RSV)

⁷ *For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸ Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. ⁹ Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; ¹¹ for he who greets him shares his wicked work.
2 John 7-11 (RSV)*

In a church ‘Absaloms’ have to be handled by the elders as a whole, or by the whole church. One individual rarely has enough authority, or confidence, to take the necessary action

To tackle an ‘Absalom’ or an ‘Adonijah’ you must have *legitimate* authority and real power, so as to be able to make bold decisions. In a business that isn’t too difficult, provided you are senior enough, or if you own it. However, a church is different because nobody ‘owns’ it. If the church is structured in a biblical way then no single individual will have complete authority, all by himself. The biblical model for church is that authority is *shared* between a number of elders, not just one man, least of all one who thinks and acts as if he is the ruler. Such a man is potentially a kind of Absalom himself.

In a church, as opposed to a business or secular organisation, the only effective way to tackle an Absalom is for all the elders, and ideally the wider membership, to act together. Then there is legitimate

authority to make decisions and any disciplinary action, or steps to expel the Absalom, can also be pursued right through to the end. If it isn't done in that way, you are likely to end up with a new illegitimate would-be 'ruler', seeking to usurp the position of the existing one-man leadership.

That said, the current leader himself may have usurped that authority in the first place, or acquired it in some illegitimate way. The traditional one-man model of church leadership is unbiblical and prone to becoming corrupted. Insecure men use it to try to hang on to power and to fend off would-be rivals. If so, they are just one illegitimate leader trying to resist another one. Therefore an Absalom cannot be tackled properly in an unbiblical, traditional church context. The leader dealing with him may well be just as illegitimate as the Absalom he is trying to tackle.

Be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves.

Jesus said, at Matthew 10:16, "*Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.*" By contrast, a wicked person is "as shrewd as a *serpent* and as innocent as a *serpent*", and a simple person tends to be "as shrewd as a *dove* and as innocent as a *dove*". Neither of these combinations is any good. We have to be "as shrewd as a *serpent* and as innocent as a *dove*". That is the only combination that will work. We are expected to operate in accordance with God's standards, even though we are surrounded by wicked people who have no regard for right or wrong.

We could match the wicked by becoming like them, but that would mean losing our innocence. Or we could just preserve our innocence, without learning to be shrewd, in which case we will be continually defeated. Alternatively, we can take the right approach, which is to preserve our innocence but to learn how to handle wicked people. This requires us to become as shrewd as the wicked, or even shrewder, yet without acting like them. In other words, we are to seek to achieve the same levels of shrewdness as they have, but without ever imitating their wickedness.

That is the only right option, but it is very difficult to achieve and takes a long time to learn. Nevertheless, it is possible. Having worked for nearly three decades, firstly in the police force and then as a lawyer and business man, I have made a lot of progress. But it took me decades to learn how to deal successfully with wicked people. Jesus was well aware of how hard it would be. He knew that the only way we could ever achieve it is by staying close to Him, studying the Bible thoroughly, and listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

We must also be willing to suffer the consequences of many mistakes and failures as we gradually learn, by trial and error, how to handle the wicked. There is no alternative. If you aren't willing to risk failure, or make mistakes, you will never get there. Maybe I have been a slow learner, but I think even apostle Paul would have taken a long time to learn these difficult lessons. Perhaps that is one reason why God kept Paul in Arabia for years before his ministry began in earnest, growing in wisdom and getting prepared. God kept Paul on the side-lines, learning and maturing, before letting him go on his first missionary journey.

The implication is that, despite his huge talent, Paul wasn't yet ready to handle the enormous responsibilities that were going to be entrusted to him. Few of us would keep someone like Paul in obscurity, unused, for such a long time. It would be like a football manager keeping Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo in the reserves for years, without letting them play in the first team. No manager would do it but God is quite willing to, especially if He has a big role in store for that person. God's way is to prepare people thoroughly and He is never in a hurry to do that, even if we are.

The hardest thing I have found in developing discernment was learning how to anticipate the devious actions of wicked people. They are so different in their approach that their thought processes and ways seem alien to naïve people. It is hard to believe they will do things which it would never occur to us to do. One reason why a simple person cannot naturally identify with the way the wicked think is that he cannot look back at examples of himself having acted in the same way.

The ways of the wicked are so alien to the simple person that he will struggle to get onto their wavelength at all. Nevertheless, that is what we are commanded to do, so as to understand their sinfulness, whilst not being sinful ourselves. God wants us to be thoroughly shrewd, astute and well-informed in everything we do, especially in handling money, power and other people. Here is how Jesus made that point:

¹He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. ²And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' ³And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' ⁵So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' ⁷Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' ⁸The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

Luke 16:1-9 (ESV)

The above passage confuses a lot of people. They wrongly think that Jesus is telling us to be devious, like this dishonest steward was. Far from it. Jesus isn't praising his *dishonesty* at all. He is merely asking us to reach the same level of *shrewdness*. But He only wants us to be shrewd in an honest and godly way, not as the world is. Moreover, the fact that He commands us to acquire such wisdom and shrewdness means that it must be possible to achieve, albeit very difficult.

The difference between being discerning and judgemental

As we saw in chapter 5, many Christians get confused about the whole subject of 'judging'. It seems, even to genuine believers, that the Bible contradicts itself. It commands us *never* to judge other people, but also commands us *always* to judge other people. It really isn't a contradiction, because it is referring to two entirely different types of judgement. The first kind, which we must *never* do, is to look down on other people with an attitude of superiority and self-righteousness and to condemn them for sins of which we are guilty ourselves. Firstly, that is hypocrisy, but it is also usurping the role that only Jesus can perform, which is to be the Judge of the whole world.

The wrong kind of judging, which we are forbidden to do

Only Jesus is qualified to judge the extent of each man's blameworthiness. Only He knows how to take into account the hundreds of different factors which either compound or mitigate their guilt. We simply can't do that, and must never even try. We are forbidden to do it by Jesus Himself:

¹"Judge not, that you be not judged. ²For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Matthew 7:1-5 (RSV)

Apostle Paul also addresses this in his letter to the Romans. He warns us that the judgment of God will come upon us if we judge others in that illegitimate and hypocritical way:

¹Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. ²We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. ³Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Romans 2:1-5 (RSV)

Paul then makes it clear that we must never engage in that type of judgment:

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹²So each of us shall give account of himself to God. ¹³Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Romans 14:10-13 (RSV)

If we judge others in this *illegitimate* way, (as a 'kree-tace', rather than as a 'diakrino' - see chapter 5) then the same criteria that we use to judge them will later be applied to us when we face the *legitimate* judgment of Jesus. Therefore, if we judge and condemn others now in an unmerciful way, those same standards will be used for our own judgment. The prospect of being judged more strictly at our own future judgment is an added reason not to judge others illegitimately now. Even where we have to assess other people, for legitimate reasons, we would still be wise to be merciful and to allow them the same leeway that we want Jesus to show us.

The right kind of judging, which we are commanded to do

The right type of judging, that we are *commanded* to do, (*diakrino*) does not involve usurping Jesus' role or being a hypocrite. There is no assumption of superiority or of being sinless ourselves. It means weighing, assessing and evaluating other people, so as to avoid being deceived, manipulated or wrongly taught. We are both *entitled and required* to judge the things that men *teach*, plus their use of any *spiritual gift* and also their *character and trustworthiness*. This applies to everybody, no matter who they are. In the passages below we are not merely permitted, but commanded by Jesus, and also by Paul, Luke and John, to assess other people's doctrine, gifts, and characters. Firstly, this is what Jesus said:

Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."
John 7:24 (RSV)

Next Paul tells us that we need to assess the nature and character of fellow believers and even to avoid contact with those who are insincere. He uses very strong words:

⁹I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; ¹⁰not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹But rather I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber--not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³God judges those outside. "Drive out the wicked person from among you."

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (RSV)

In this next passage, Luke praises the people of Berea because they carefully checked the Scriptures to see whether apostle Paul's teaching was sound. Far from being offended, Paul was really pleased. Luke even describes the Bereans as 'noble' for being so vigilant:

Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Acts 17:11 (RSV)

When it comes to other people's exercise of spiritual gifts, we are told to be equally careful and to “*test everything*”. The responsibility for doing this testing is not solely with leaders, but on *every individual believer*. None of us can delegate to anybody else this duty to be vigilant and discerning:

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit, ²⁰do not despise prophesying, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good,
1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 (RSV)

Apostle John also backs this up and warns the people of the late first century AD that there were already false prophets active in the Church. There must be a great many more of them today:

¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already.

1 John 4:1-3 (RSV)

When John refers to testing the 'spirits' he is not only referring to evil spirits or demons, but also the *human spirit* of each person we meet. So we are also to test what kind of nature or character people have. Jesus expresses a similar point and so does Paul:

¹⁵"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. ¹⁸A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Matthew 7:15-20 (RSV)

²Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!

1 Corinthians 6:2-3 (RSV)

Never assume that people are wise - begin by holding no view at all.

There are four main categories of people, the wicked, the fool, the simple and the wise. The wise are also, by definition, good and trustworthy. We are repeatedly warned about the first two groups and told to be on the alert. How can it make any sense to assume that *everybody* we meet is wise, as if there is only one category of person, when the Bible plainly tells us that there are four? If that was the case, and everybody was the same, it would negate the need for us to be vigilant, or even to assess people at all.

We know that people have different blood groups, A, B or O, and that they are also either rhesus positive or negative. It would therefore be absurd to assume that everybody we meet is in blood group B rhesus negative. Doctors make no assumptions about your blood group until tests have been done. We need

to do the same when deciding whether the people we meet are wicked, foolish, simple or wise. Begin by having an open mind and make no assumptions, in any direction.

Be slow to trust people.

Be slow to trust people. Also keep an open mind until you have known them long enough, done enough tests, and seen them in enough situations, to be able to form a meaningful and reliable view. Even when you feel there is a basis for trusting a person, that does not mean you should jump overnight to trusting them 100% and for all purposes. We need to have a number of different levels of trust. Each person we deal with should then be moved up gradually, a step at a time, from one grade of trustworthiness to another, not all in one go.

It is like getting a job working for the Foreign Office, MI5 or MI6. They may have made enquiries and taken references, such that they are willing to trust you in a secretarial role. But that does not mean they will trust you with *all* their secret data. Many of their activities, and most of their database, will still be out of bounds to you until you firstly establish yourself at a junior clerical grade and prove that you can be trusted at that level. Only then will they consider going any further.

Even then, they will only move your security rating up by one grade, not straight to the highest level. Trust has to be earned, stage by stage, not all at once. That one point would save us from a lot of trouble if we could only learn to operate that way. Most Christians are far too quick to trust others, even strangers, as a default-setting. Some of us also have only one level of complete 100% trust for everybody, instead of a series of graduated levels or stages.

You can quickly conclude that someone *cannot* be trusted, but you must take your time before concluding that they *can* be.

You must be slow to conclude that you *can* trust a person. However it is legitimate to quickly form the conclusion that a person is *not* to be trusted. That is quite different and there is no contradiction or inconsistency in that. A person can properly be classified as *untrustworthy* based on a single incident, even if it's just a first impression on meeting them. However, to classify them as *trustworthy* requires a long and consistently positive series of incidents and tests, and for them to handle all of those satisfactorily.

Therefore your standard default position should be that nobody is to be trusted at all until and unless, and only to the extent, that it is proved that they can be. Until then, just keep an open mind and reserve judgement. In other words, even if you currently have no evidence to suggest they *cannot* be trusted, you should still assume that they cannot be until it is *proved* that they *can* be. However, if evidence does quickly emerge that a person *cannot* be trusted, you can legitimately speed up the assessment process and conclude that they are not trustworthy.

You do not need to wait until you have got several reasons not to trust them. One reason is quite sufficient when you are travelling in that direction. Moreover, if there is any reason to think they might be *wicked*, then not only avoid telling them important or classified information - don't tell them anything *at all*. Don't even tell them what you had for breakfast, and I mean that literally.

Even a fact as trivial as that is capable of being misused. Therefore a complete news blackout is needed when dealing with the wicked. Furthermore, it is right and proper to go to this stage in one single step, the very *first time* you see any sign of falseness or malice. There's no need to build up to it steadily or to get corroboration beforehand, as is needed when deciding how far somebody *can* be trusted.

Be very careful about whom you speak to or confide in, especially about sensitive matters.

You need to be particularly careful as to whom you confide in about sensitive matters. Some people feel a strong desire to tell their secrets and problems to others. It comforts them to do so. If you are like that, make a big effort to resist that urge. Only confide in anybody at all if it is *essential* that you do so, which will be rare. Don't do it merely to make conversation, or to gain comfort from sharing your troubles.

The people you are confiding in today may be exposed next year as false and untrustworthy, and as having been so from the beginning. I know, as it has happened to me many times. Sometimes you may find that you confide in people without even knowing *why* you are doing it. The information is *drawn* out of you, as if it was being sucked out or siphoned. If that happens you are likely to have been the victim of witchcraft, i.e. mind-control.

The other person was probably using a combination of demonic power, together with their own soulish power and ordinary craftiness, to extract information from you unconsciously, even against your will. That is a standard part of what witchcraft is all about, i.e. the manipulation, domination and control of other people by using either demonic power, or one's own soulish power, or both combined.

If you suspect that someone is wicked, or even that they might be, then don't tell them anything at all, however trivial those facts might seem to you.

If you have gone beyond merely suspecting a person and have concluded they are wicked, or are probably so, then do not merely withhold *sensitive* information from them. Withhold *all* information, whether it is sensitive or not. Tell them nothing at all, even if it appears to be of no conceivable use to anybody. You can be sure they will find some corrupt use for it or they would not bother to extract it from you.

If nothing else, they will use those tiny facts about you to give the false impression to others that they are close friends of yours. Then the lies they tell are more likely to be believed. The very fact that they can refer to small but accurate details about you will give the impression that the lies they tell are also correct. Confidence tricksters use this technique to get you to believe the big lie by providing you with a number of little facts and details which are true. That lowers your guard and makes you feel they must be authentic. Therefore don't give the wicked any such facts or details.

When I ran a law firm certain staff would try to find out trivial little facts about me and then use those to get others to think they knew me well. That gave them power over other staff. It implied that they were in a position to influence me and to affect their colleagues' careers. To a sincere person, that may sound far-fetched, but I can assure you it is a very normal way for wicked people to operate. That is one reason why King David spoke of putting a muzzle on his own mouth when the wicked were present:

*I said, "I will guard my ways,
that I may not sin with my tongue;
I will guard my mouth with a muzzle,
so long as the wicked are in my presence." Psalm 39:1 (ESV)*

Also, when a wicked person can quote little facts about you it will cause others to conclude that if they know you that well, and if you have already disclosed that information to them, they must be a person whom you trust. Therefore others may conclude that they can also trust that person and open up to them, giving yet more information which they would not otherwise have given.

They might also say to themselves that if this person already knows this much, then it cannot do any harm for them to provide additional facts, because he already seems to know some of it anyway. Therefore they will open up to that wicked person and say things which may harm you, or them, or other people, all because you were unguarded at the beginning and said too much in front of the wicked.

To the wicked, no fact is ever too trivial to be useful. They will find a use for anything, because knowledge is power. Therefore wicked people crave for any kind of information. They will want to know what you are doing, how your business is operating, whom you know, how your family is, what church you go to, when you are going on holiday, and anything else under the sun. I remember one occasion, just after I'd left a church due to the wickedness of the leadership, especially Rick, the senior leader. Some months later I went to a barbecue at a friend's house.

Also in attendance was Rick's brother in law, 'Dennis'. He knew that I had left the church and why. Indeed, Dennis was a minor part of the reason why we had left, because he had tried to manipulate me himself, on Rick's behalf. Therefore I also had a low opinion of him and he was well aware of that too. But he didn't allow any of that to stop him from seeking to get as much information from me as he could. On the contrary, he came bounding over to me at the barbecue and began to fire a series of questions at me, as if he was being friendly.

He firstly asked how my family was but I simply replied "*Fine*". He then asked several more questions about my business, what staff we had, how much work we had taken on, etc. I just repeatedly replied "*It's doing fine*". My terse and evasive responses may have sounded odd to a bystander, but I wasn't being rude. I just wasn't willing to tell Dennis anything at all. I also knew that he had no genuine interest in my family, or my business. He just wanted facts that he could use, and also report back to others, for them to use. So it was he who was being rude, not me.

He kept pursuing me, like an investigative journalist, and paid no attention to the obvious fact that I was giving no answers. Moreover, Dennis was not the least bit offended by my non-answers, as you would expect a person to be if his questions were sincere. He was far too thick-skinned and false to be offended, as is usually the case with the wicked. On that occasion I resisted him completely and he got no information whatsoever from me. But I still found it a struggle. While he was questioning me I felt a strange urge to tell him things voluntarily, even when he wasn't asking questions.

It felt as if information was being sucked from me with a siphon. Yet I knew enough by then to realise that if you ever feel *drawn* to reveal things you must immediately *stop yourself*. Force yourself to zip up your mouth and say nothing. That urge to reveal information is probably due to other people's soulish manipulation or mind-control, which is an aspect of witchcraft. You must always resist it. Moreover, if a person seems to have a close interest in the details of your life and *wants* information, or *keeps asking questions*, it should set an alarm bell ringing.

The chances are they are asking those questions for illegitimate and even sinister reasons. Of course they could just be "making conversation" or trying to be friendly. But even if that is the case, there is no harm done by you gently and politely steering the conversation away from yourself and on to other topics. If the person is genuine they won't mind. They will be equally happy to discuss other things. However, if their motives are evil, they will certainly mind and will try hard to bring the conversation back to you and to get as much information from you as they can.

Where you see any such attempts being made to bring the conversation back to asking questions then beware. It is a strong indicator that they are pumping you for information, either to use for themselves or to pass on to others for them to use. If so, clam up even more firmly. Change the subject, as often as it takes. Or start asking them questions about themselves or their families. Don't worry about whether this might sound impolite. Only sincere people worry about such things. The wicked don't. At any rate, it has to be done, whether it upsets them or not.

Genuine, sincere people will take an interest in you and in what you are doing, but they will never crave for information or make any effort to extract it from you.

You should consider it odd, and sinister, if people crave for information about you. That is not how sincere, wholesome, trustworthy people are. Therefore if a person has an excessive, persistent desire

to know about you and your business, family, church, relatives etc, then take note. See it for the problem that it is. Their very questions need to be seen as a warning. Genuine people will take a healthy interest in you, and will ask a moderate number of reasonable questions. But they will be quite relaxed if you choose not to answer all their questions because, although they are interested in you, they have no *craving* for information.

That is one of the features which differentiate the sincere from the insincere. When I have spoken on this theme one question people ask is how they can refuse to answer persistent, probing questions without sounding rude. One woman was concerned about this because some people she knew closely, and could not easily avoid, were regularly asking her for information. I advised her to simply give no answers, or to give evasive answers, or just to change the subject. She then asked: "*But what if they ask me why I am repeatedly avoiding their questions?*"

I replied: "*If they ask that, then simply ask them why they are repeatedly asking the same questions.*" That seemed to be a breakthrough for her. She had, up to then, only been able to see the rudeness of her refusing to answer their questions. She suddenly saw that it is actually far ruder, and even ominous, for them to keep pressing her for answers to intrusive questions which she obviously doesn't want to answer. We should all try hard to avoid rudeness, but it is also important to discern the sinister intentions of other people who keep pressing us for information.

Whilst we might try to avoid the perception of rudeness in stone-walling them, that is far less important than the need to tell them nothing. Besides, their behaviour means they forfeit the right to have their feelings taken into account. That said, you needn't worry in any case. Such people have the skin of a rhinoceros. You can't offend them, even if you wanted to. They are far too hard-faced and thick-skinned for that to be possible. Their only emotion when you refuse to answer them is frustration, or even rage, at being thwarted. They aren't offended or hurt, as sincere people would be if you stone-walled them.

An example of how to refuse to answer questions is Chief Superintendent Adam Dalgliesh from the TV series by PD James. He was a senior police officer played by Roy Marsden and was brilliant at side-stepping questions which he didn't want to answer. Let him be your model. When asked a question by a witness or suspect he would just pause for a second, completely ignore it, without a trace of awkwardness, and then ask a question of his own. They couldn't complain, as they knew their own question to him was inappropriate, and even impertinent.

Learning how to identify the wicked - watch for their fruit.

We all let our flesh rule over our spirit too often. We then behave sinfully, with displays of temper, impatience, lust, envy, greed, selfishness, pride, lack of self-control and so on. Where we see any of that in others, or in ourselves, it is the sinful flesh nature coming to the surface and showing itself. That occurs regularly, even amongst mature Christians, as in the examples given above. But it does not, in itself, mean we are wicked. If it did, we would all be wicked, because we all continue to act in the flesh at times, even after we are saved.

We cannot identify a person's nature just by appearances. The only reliable way to identify a godly person, or a wicked one, is by examining their *fruit*. You can't tell merely by what they say, or even by what others say about them, but only by the fruit produced by their life over a reasonably long period. You need to see how they behave and what their life actually *produces*, not just what they *say*. The wicked can sound impressive and even spiritual, but in the end, they will produce evil fruit. That is there to be seen by those who are looking out for it, but not by those who aren't:

³³"*Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.* ³⁴*You brood of vipers! how can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of*

*the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*³⁵ *The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.*

Matthew 12:33-35 (RSV)

Even in a church, the main method for identifying wicked people is by observing and evaluating their fruit:

¹⁵ *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. ¹⁸ A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits*

Matthew 7:15-20 (RSV)

²⁰ *And he said, "What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. ²¹For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man."*

Mark 7:20-23 (RSV)

We cannot tell much, if anything, merely from a person's observance of rules and regulations. Many wicked people keep all the religious rules and are very respectable, but they are still wicked. Likewise, there are others who are less meticulous about outward forms and procedures, but on the inside their hearts are right with God and they are full of sincerity. Therefore you can't just go by appearances, in either direction, and still less by observance of rules, traditions and liturgy.

However, the fleshly behaviour that we see in others may sometimes just be as a result of their immaturity, not necessarily wickedness.

Not all bad behaviour is necessarily evidence of wickedness, even if it is very severe. In particular we have to make allowances for the immaturity of the other person. A new believer behaving badly, even very badly, may just be showing their spiritual age and allowing their flesh to govern them. That would not be a sign of wickedness in someone who is at that early stage, just as it would not be if we saw bad behaviour in a young child. They may just be operating in the flesh and being self-centred, immature and undisciplined because they have not yet learned self-control:

¹*But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?*

1 Corinthians 3:1-3 (ESV)

On the other hand, we might see a mature person, even a leader, who ought to know better, but they are behaving dishonestly, maliciously and in the flesh. What they are doing could well be wicked. The more a man knows the Bible, the more his wrong behaviour should be a cause for concern, and the less we should make allowances for it. Thus a lie coming from the mouth of a church leader is extremely serious and is a sign of his being wicked, not just immature. But it would not be anywhere near as serious if the same lie came from the mouth of a new believer.