

CHAPTER 15

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

²⁶ *For wicked men are found among my people;
they lurk like fowlers lying in wait.
They set a trap;
they catch men.*

Jeremiah 5:26 (ESV)

¹⁶ *“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

Matthew 10:16 (RSV)

¹⁷ *I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them.* ¹⁸ *For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.*

Romans 16:17-18 (RSV)

⁴ *For if someone comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough.*

2 Corinthians 11:4 (RSV)

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,² through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared,

1 Timothy 4:1-2 (RSV)

²⁴ *But when a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice and does the same abominations that the wicked person does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die.*

Ezekiel 18:24 (ESV)

The wicked like to be with other wicked people. Therefore you can often identify them by simply looking at the company they keep.

The wicked want to mix with others who are like themselves, as we all do. So they naturally tend to congregate with other wicked people. They quickly recognise each other and they feel comfortable together, and prefer being with their own kind, rather than being with the wise or the simple:

⁴ *An evildoer listens to wicked lips;
and a liar gives heed to a mischievous tongue.*

Proverbs 17:4 (RSV)

*“They band themselves together,
they lurk, they watch my steps.....*

Psalms 56:6(a) (RSV)

This tendency of the wicked to recognise and associate with each other can be turned to your advantage. They instinctively know who the other wicked people are in a workplace or church and they want to be

with their own kind. Therefore, without realising it, they are helping you to identify both themselves and their friends, merely by the company they keep. You can use them as one of your 'carbon monoxide detectors' to reveal who the others are. The saying that "*You can judge a man by the friends he keeps*" is true. You really can, and with surprising accuracy.

Therefore, if you want to know what a man is like, take careful note of those with whom he *habitually* mixes. His friends' wickedness may be easier for you to see than his. They may not bother to hide their true nature from you because you are a stranger to them. However the wicked man himself, whom you do know, has every reason to hide his real nature from you. Therefore if you see wickedness in his companions, whom you *don't* know, look more closely for wickedness *in him*, the person whom you *do* know. An incident some years ago may help to explain this point.

I was managing a large law firm and was struggling to tackle a long running problem with a nest of hostile, embittered employees. Their conduct was bad and they were disloyal. I had managed to identify some of them, but not all. I had a lot of staff and it is not easy to keep an eye on all of them at the same time. I sacked one of them, 'Gary', for neglect of his duties and other misconduct. He was certainly wicked and very arrogant. After he left he went out to a nearby pub with some of his former colleagues, including some who were still working for me.

I knew nothing about them arranging to meet up with Gary but, by pure coincidence, or more probably by God's guidance, I walked into that very pub on the same evening. There was Gary, who had just been sacked, together with a small group of some of my worst staff. In amongst that cluster of sour and discontented people was a young man, whom I will call 'Derek'. I had always felt he was a loyal member of staff, as I had started him off in his legal career and he had always worked hard and was very polite. I had therefore assumed he was happy, and that he was faithful to the firm.

It therefore puzzled me when I saw him there with this toxic little group, all of whom were wicked (in my subjective view). However, I told myself there must be some innocent explanation for Derek being there. He seemed out of place, as far as I could see. I felt he did not belong with such people and assumed he had been roped in somehow, or had been unduly influenced by them. But I was completely wrong. It turned out that he was just as contemptuous as the others, without me having noticed any sign of it. He had the same negative, hostile attitude, despite all I had done for him.

Derek's real nature came out into the open a year or so later when he chose to leave the firm to get another job. As soon as he knew he was leaving, he took his 'mask' off. I then saw a different side to him that I never knew was there, though it had been there all along. He suddenly became openly resentful and showed a sullen ingratitude for all I had done for him. I found the dramatic change in his manner a surprise. But I had already been given a clear warning of his *real nature* a year earlier, when I saw him in the pub with that small group of embittered staff and ex-staff.

However, I missed the significance of him being there with them that night and failed to take the incident seriously enough, or to be guided by it. Although I had not, at that stage, discerned Derek's real nature and attitude, the other wicked staff had had no difficulty in doing so. Indeed, they had never been under any illusions to begin with. They had weighed him up correctly from the outset and he had equally accurately discerned their real nature.

His being with that hostile group at the pub the year before should have been a clear indicator to me of what *he* really was himself. I didn't have enough discernment to see those tell-tale signs at the time, so I missed that warning. If it happened today I would recognise it much faster and would give it far more weight. But back then, I understood the wicked much less thoroughly than I do now. I also underestimated their numbers and the harm they can do.

An objection someone has put to me is that employees are free to associate with whoever they want, especially out of work hours, and that who they choose to mix with is none of my business and ought

not to influence me. An employee, indeed anybody at all, is free to associate with whoever they want. I am not disputing that in the least. However, that is irrelevant.

The issue is not whether *they* are free to associate with whoever they choose. Of course they are. The issue is whether *you* are entitled to *draw adverse inferences* from the choices they make. My belief is that you can, and should, draw such inferences and that you need to act upon them. Indeed, you would be profoundly naïve not to do so.

How Stephen and Rhoda unwittingly identified all the hostile, embittered members of a church for us, by inviting them all to a meeting with them

‘Stephen and Rhoda’ left the church when we asked Rhoda to answer some questions about the gossip she had been spreading and the lies she had told. Some months later they were still very hostile. Therefore they invited some past and present members of the church to meetings that were taking place in someone’s house. We didn’t know anything about these meetings at the time, but learned of them afterwards. The point is that every person who was invited to those meetings was, in one way or another, resentful or embittered.

Rhoda rang round and invited each person herself. She selected them for the very reason that they were so resentful. She didn’t invite even one person who wasn’t sour and hostile towards us. This was plain when we looked at the list of names of those who had gone to the meetings. We were told of these by a couple who had previously been bitter towards us, due to some lies they had been told by Rhoda. They ceased to be so when they learned the truth. They then told us they had been invited to those meetings, who else had gone, and what had been spoken about.

Simply by looking at the list of people whom Rhoda had invited, one could see who all the bitter people were. Their natures were unwittingly revealed to us by Rhoda, because she knew who they all were and what they were really like. It also served to confirm Rhoda’s own malice that they were all willing to go to the meetings. The guidance operated in both directions. Rhoda’s willingness to invite them proved that *they* were false and bitter, and their willingness to attend proved that *she* was.

They *went* because they knew how embittered *she* was, and they were *invited* because Rhoda knew how bitter *they* were. So, her inviting them helped us identify their bitterness and their willingness to attend confirmed hers, and showed that we had not misjudged Rhoda. They were all acting like police ‘sniffer dogs’ on our behalf, finding where the other hostile people were and revealing them to us. Therefore, all we really needed to do was to take careful note of who they each were drawn to.

Our own lack of discernment could then be made up for by taking note of *theirs*. Moreover, Rhoda had also unwittingly confirmed the loyalty and sincerity of those *faithful* members of the church who chose *not* to cleave to her and came with us when we started the new church. Not even one of *them* had been invited to Rhoda’s meetings. Even in that regard, she helped us by confirming their genuineness. She knew, even better than we did, that they were on our side, not hers.

A wicked person can very quickly discern wickedness in others.

A wicked person has a heightened awareness of the wickedness in others and can recognise it far faster than a godly person can. They can also quickly discern if a person is bitter and resentful, and therefore receptive to being recruited to their cause. I have often observed their feral perceptiveness in operation in churches and workplaces. The wicked can also recognise someone else's dishonest intentions. I once had a PA called Julie, to whom I referred earlier. She was very wicked herself and could immediately spot other wicked people and predict their intentions.

On one occasion we had an office Christmas dinner at a hotel and I gave a large cash tip to the proprietor to share between all the staff. Julie told me the next morning that both she and her husband knew, even at the moment I gave the tip, that it would not go to the staff and that the owner would steal it all for himself. They could both see that, but I couldn't. It turned out they were correct. I later discovered that the hotel owner was a very nasty man. However, Julie and her husband had perceived his real nature *instantly*, whereas I only worked it out gradually, and much later on.

Perhaps the main reason for their enhanced discernment, is that the wicked have the *same devious intentions* themselves. Therefore they can recognise the tell-tale signs in others. They can also quickly see the opportunities for theft, or for gaining personal advantage, that they themselves would have seized upon, if they had been in that person's situation. Naïve people, who have no such wicked intentions of their own, do not even notice such opportunities arising in the lives of others.

When trying to work out what is going on, be willing to speak to other sincere people in the church. Exchanging information with them is not necessarily gossip, if your motives are pure.

Some sincere Christians needlessly impose a difficulty on themselves if they are excessively anxious not to gossip. They then find themselves disadvantaged when dealing with the wicked, especially within churches. It can end up in a situation where the godly people say the least and the wicked ones say the most. This also applies in workplaces, where a Christian boss or employee feels unable to speak with others to check things, compare notes or exchange information. They fear that doing so would be gossip. The wicked don't care whether it is right or wrong to gossip.

They press on and get information from work colleagues or church members and use it to great effect. Accordingly, the wicked are far better informed than the righteous. They gather information about you and others, so as to know your plans and to be able to lie more effectively, both to you and about you. Their lack of scruples gives the wicked a major competitive advantage. That is one reason why they so often win the battles in churches and workplaces. They are like professionals fighting amateurs. They know more about what's going on, and they also hunt in packs.

By contrast, the godly tend to operate on their own and are less well informed and receive less help. Sincere people rely on the small amount of knowledge they pick up for themselves, without discussing things with others. They also have nobody to watch their backs or warn them of danger. That is partly because the godly don't feel able to gossip, but also because they are often not even aware that any battle is being fought. Therefore they don't know they are being plotted against and undermined by a group of wicked people who are working together, not singly.

A clear pattern has always emerged when I have tackled wicked church members, wicked church leaders, or wicked employees. I have learned, usually very late in the process, that whereas I was generally acting alone, they were working together with others. They were spying, gathering information and giving each other tip-offs. They were also hiding evidence, intimidating witnesses, egging on other wrongdoers and generally supporting one another. The wicked also combine together to undermine anybody who is asking unwelcome questions.

If you are a *sincere* person who wants to do what is right, make it your policy to work together with at least a few others, whom you can *trust*, and who are also *sincere*. Then you will be able to exchange information about what is going on so that you are not isolated and reliant solely on your own discernment. They can help you to get a better perspective and to work out whether something was a one-off or part of a wider pattern or character trait. It's hard to work out things like that on your own, as you're unlikely to get enough data to be able to "join up the dots" or form any *patterns*.

By pooling your knowledge you are more able to see those things. You get a clearer picture of other people's characters by having more to go on than just your own dealings with them. You can then find out what they have said or done to others, which may not be consistent with what they said or did to

you. If so you will find out more quickly who the liars and hypocrites are. Unlike the godly, the wicked say different things to different people. When you discover they are doing that you have a useful early warning that they are likely to be doing other wicked things too and may be wicked overall.

You and other godly people can also watch out for each other and give a warning if one or other of you is being lied about or undermined. In addition, you can give advice, guidance and a better sense of perspective to each other. Then you can more accurately gauge whether incidents or situations are important. Lastly, you can pool your discernment so you have the benefit of each other's 'carbon monoxide detectors' or 'antennae' as well as your own. This can greatly increase the overall accuracy and reliability of your judgments of other people (*diakrino*) and your assessment of situations.

How six of us pooled our knowledge and discernment to deal with a couple in our church called 'Philip and Sonia' who were behaving badly

The points made in the previous section are illustrated by this story of how a small group of us within a church once got together to share our knowledge. The problems in that church had been going on for some time, but they came to the fore when we had to tackle the problem of 'Rhoda'. She then left the church, taking her family and several other members with her. Their departure helped us greatly and was a major step forward for the church, but we still had problems. You will frequently find that the departure of one wicked person, or even a group, does not bring the problems to an end.

That is because they were not acting alone and there are still other wicked people in that church or business whom you have not yet identified. Therefore the problems in the church, and the unrest, discord and gossip, still carried on. In particular, Philip and Sonia continued to be a hindrance. I felt increasingly unable to trust them. Their loyalty was exclusively to those who had left, not to those of us who had stayed. I also felt that Philip and Sonia were insincere and two-faced. They also only ever spoke up for the wrongdoers, not their victims, or those who did right.

When Rhoda lied about Charles, we had to work hard to get Philip and Sonia to accept that those stories were lies. Even when they reluctantly accepted the plain facts, those lies did not seem important to them. Moreover, being told the true facts did not alter their attitudes, either of Rhoda or Charles. It really mattered to me that Philip and Sonia had held, and continued to hold, such a negative view of Charles. Their stubborn unwillingness to begin to think well of him, or to think badly of Rhoda for lying about him, was a problem in itself, quite apart from other difficulties they were creating.

They also talked behind backs and made critical comments about individuals and the direction in which the church was going, but without openly saying so to anybody's face. In forming these assessments of Philip and Sonia, I only knew the facts that I had personally heard or seen. Those were enough to cause me concern, but I didn't know what anybody else thought, or have access to their separate stockpiles of knowledge and discernment. So I eventually approached two trusted couples, whom I knew to be sincere, and asked them what they thought of Philip and Sonia.

That doesn't necessarily mean they would be right in their opinions, but it did mean I could gain their perspective, alongside my own. That would help me to assess the situation more accurately and with a better chance of forming a reliable overall judgment. Therefore, we met up, as three couples, and discussed Philip and Sonia. We compared notes of our own personal experiences, and listed the things we had each seen and heard. We then set out how we each assessed the nature and gravity of the overall situation, i.e. how big the problem was on a scale of 0-10.

I suggested that we formulate our thoughts by asking ourselves four main questions and gathering all our information and all our discernment under these four headings. The first was our collective, pooled knowledge of all the facts and *causes for concern* that we each knew about. Each couple might know of five such incidents or problems, but those may not entirely overlap with what the others knew. So,

between the three couples, the total number of events or issues identified would be likely to add up to more than five, though less than 15, as there would inevitably be some overlap.

The second heading was whether these combined facts, i.e. all the individual ‘dots’, formed a *pattern* when they were ‘joined up’ and looked at as a whole, rather than one at a time. The third heading was *how serious* were any such patterns or character traits that emerged. That is, how big a problem did we face? This is really important because, if you are a sincere person with a strong sense of mercy, you will tend to doubt yourself and wonder whether you are over-reacting. Lastly we asked ourselves, in the light of all those things, what should we *do* about Philip and Sonia?

I had suggested that we break it all down under these four headings because, otherwise, it can be hard to see the wood for the trees. At any given moment one issue will loom up and become the focal point, but while you focus on that, you find yourself unable to bear all the others in mind. That kind of sequential thinking can prevent you from arriving at a balanced, overall view. Your mind keeps dwelling on one incident at a time, rather than on the whole picture.

Even after you have worked out who the wrongdoers are you still need to work with at least a few trusted people to get support and avoid being overwhelmed by the wicked. They will almost certainly out-manoeuvre you if you remain alone and have nobody cooperating with you and providing support, advice and information. That kind of collaboration between the godly is just as necessary after the wicked have been identified as it was beforehand, while you were still trying to identify them.

Otherwise, a handful of wicked people, or even one, can rule over a church of fifty or a hundred. However, if a few godly, honest, sincere-hearted Christians work together, and pool their knowledge and understanding, the tables can be turned. Those few, by working together, can make themselves into more than a match for the wicked. That is still the case even if all the other sincere people in the church are sound asleep and have no idea what’s going on behind the scenes.

Remember to ask God for guidance, and for the gift of discernment, when trying to decide what a person’s real nature is.

It is surprising how rarely people seek God’s guidance when trying to discern a person’s real nature. We tend to rely on ourselves and it doesn’t occur to us to ask God to help us to see whether people are trustworthy. I learned my lesson, through repeated failures, that my standard default-setting should be to seek God’s guidance about people and not to rely solely on my own understanding. Let me give you an example of an occasion when God answered my prayers and gave me direct guidance. It concerned Sonia, the wife of Philip.

I was increasingly concerned about her behaviour, and spiritual condition and I could tell for myself that there were problems. But I wasn’t sure how serious those problems were, or how concerned I ought to be. One day, as we were preparing to go to a house group meeting at which Sonia would be present, I prayed for God’s guidance. I asked Him to show me what Sonia was really like, how bad the situation was, and how seriously I ought to take it. Later that evening, at the house group meeting, God gave me a vivid vision which starkly revealed Sonia’s spiritual condition.

Her face suddenly mutated as I looked at her and became like a hideous gargoyle on a medieval church building. Her face also became grey and her skin looked like stone. It was also contorted and evil and was covered in pock marks. After about 10 seconds, during which I stared at her face, it suddenly transformed itself back to what it normally looked like. I knew immediately that God had answered my prayer and had allowed me to see Sonia’s real nature and spiritual condition. There was a demon inside her. That explained a lot of the problems we had been having with her.

She and Philip had, many years earlier, been involved in spiritualism. However, so far as I knew, they had never been delivered of any demons, either when they first became Christians, or since. I believe

God was showing me that the demon was still inside her, after all those years, and was having a major effect on her character and behaviour. If anybody gets involved in the occult, and especially if they actively engage in things like spiritualism, fortune-telling and séances etc, they are highly likely to have a demon enter into them. It will then stay permanently, until and unless it is expelled.

I did not act on what I had seen, but I took it as my cue to investigate the situation more thoroughly. I started to find out what other information I could gather to help me to assess the true nature and spiritual condition of Philip and Sonia. I also called the meeting I referred to earlier with two couples whom I trusted and shared what I had seen. We then discussed Philip and Sonia openly for the first time, as we had all been totally confidential about our concerns up to that point.

When we shared what we each knew, a host of additional events, issues, problems and concerns came to light, about which each of us had previously only known bits and pieces. It was as if we had each had a few sections of a jigsaw puzzle, but none of us had had all the pieces until then. So, the revelation which God gave me was in answer to a direct prayer for guidance which then galvanised me into calling that meeting.

That, in turn, led to me finding out what the others' concerns were and to us drawing up a detailed catalogue of incidents. When we looked at that long list, in its entirety, the breadth and depth and gravity of the situation became obvious to us all, and some clear patterns emerged. However, we probably wouldn't have reached that stage until much later, or at all, if I hadn't prayed for guidance.

Sincere people also need to keep each other informed of developments, while an on-going situation is being dealt with.

One barrier which prevents good people identifying the wicked earlier, and dealing with them properly, is that they don't feel entitled to talk about their concerns or to share their misgivings with others. They wrongly assume that it would be gossip. However, sharing information, seeking advice, exchanging evidence and identifying patterns of behaviour are not *necessarily* gossip, *if* your sincere intention is to find out the truth, rather than to entertain yourself or others. Honest, faithful people *need* to talk to each other, and far earlier than they normally do.

That is not only true in the early stages, where you are first beginning to wonder about a person and are looking for facts to prove or disprove your suspicions. It also applies at the subsequent stages of investigating and tackling them. That whole process can take a long time, and you need to keep in touch with others throughout it and stay informed about what the wicked are doing. Therefore, whatever stage you are at in tackling the wicked, keep in touch with other godly people, provided you feel sure you can trust them.

Try to keep up to date with what is happening and, in particular, with what the wicked are doing in response to your enquiries or the steps you are taking. Although *you* will hopefully play fair, you can be sure that *the wicked won't*. From the moment you first question them, they will begin to conspire with others to undermine you, obstruct your enquiries, intimidate witnesses and interfere with your actions to tackle them. They rarely operate alone, at least not when they know you are on to them. From then on, if not already, they will operate as a pack.

They will seek to discredit you, lie about you, get you isolated, reduce your credibility and prevent others giving evidence. They do not worry at all about whether it is right to speak to others, or whether it would be gossip, or a breach of confidentiality. They will leave it entirely to you to be constrained by ethical considerations like those. They will just get on with scheming, lying and manipulating, and do whatever it takes to avoid detection and punishment.

So, if you assume they are keeping everything confidential, as you are doing, then you are sadly mistaken. Therefore stay in touch with others, provided you are sure they are *trustworthy*. Gain their

perspective and advice and ask them to pray for you. They can also speak up for you and watch out for any evidence of you being undermined behind your back, or of witnesses being ‘got at’ or intimidated in order to silence them. If you don’t take these wise precautions the wicked will run rings around you and obstruct everything you are trying to do.

When a group of sincere, godly people have to mix with, or work alongside, the wicked it’s important to stay together. Don’t leave anyone alone with them.

Even when you are not in the middle of an investigation into the activities of a wicked person, you still need the help of others to avoid being harmed by wicked work colleagues or wicked church members. So if there are malicious colleagues working alongside you, make sure you team up with other sincere people, *if you can find any*. Then you can give one another help and advice and watch each other’s backs. After we tackled Philip and Sonia it resulted in a group of us concluding that we needed to leave and start a new church, mainly because of them.

A week or so later we were all thrown back together with them again at a teaching day at which we and they had previously helped out with catering, bookstalls and clearing away etc. Philip and Sonia, plus another two women, ‘Edna’ and ‘Judith’ who were close to them, and hostile to us, were also helping out. From the start of the day, I could see that trouble was brewing. All four of them were in a foul temper but they were still determined to work alongside us. That was a problem because they were creating a hostile atmosphere, which was uncomfortable, especially for the ladies.

They even staged a flamboyant ‘walkout’ when I stood up to speak at the teaching day. I had been asked to do so at the last minute, as the speaker had been delayed in traffic. Philip and Sonia hoped this little protest would upset me and throw me off track. In fact, to increase the theatrical impact, they each went to separate seats at either side of the hall, and also right at the back, so their walking out (via the front) would be as noticeable as possible. However it didn’t work, at least with me. I was actually very pleased to see them going out.

However, some of the others were upset, not only by that spectacle, but by their unpleasant behaviour in the kitchen. All day long they were seeking to unsettle our people, especially our wives. In particular, they would swoop in whenever one of our members was left alone for a moment. They saw that as an opportunity to be annoying. For example, when one of our ladies was temporarily left on her own in the kitchen, they went straight in and began to speak to her in an oily and insincere way, while the others were absent.

They also approached another lady when she was left on her own, due to someone going out to fetch something. Their brazenness unsettled some of our people, and even made them feel violated. I learned an important lesson that day. We should have taken far more care to ensure that none of us were ever left alone with them. It was at those times that their ‘approaches’ were made and most of the ‘fiery darts’ were fired.

Don’t show grace and mercy while you’re still making your decisions as to what a person is, or how bad their misconduct is. Only do so later, when deciding what to do with them.

I have learned over many years of dealing with misconduct by employees, church members or church leaders that you need to make your decisions dispassionately and be cool and analytical when you consider the facts. That is essential while you are still weighing up the reliability of the evidence, identifying any patterns that emerge, and classifying the seriousness of the issues or character traits. You can’t allow your emotions to enter in at that stage, while you are still trying to work out what the facts are, what they signify, and how much they matter.

In particular you can't, at that stage, allow yourself to extend any grace or mercy towards the people concerned. It must all be factual, objective and logical, based solely on the strength of the evidence and the reliability of the witnesses. 'Grace' means giving people what they don't deserve. 'Mercy' means not giving them what they do deserve. But you can't offer anybody either of those things until *after* you have decided what the facts are. Only later, when all the analysing has been done, and you have formed all your conclusions, can you afford to show any grace or mercy.

You can then allow yourself to show those qualities, while you are deciding *what to do* with, or about, the people concerned, and while you are confronting or removing them. However to show any grace or mercy, or to be influenced by your emotions in any way, prior to this stage, would be premature and inappropriate. Grace and mercy can play a part in how you handle people *after* you have decided what the facts are. But they cannot play any part in the decision-making process itself, while you are still working out what has happened, why it happened, and what the truth is.

If you allow your feelings to enter in during the investigation or assessment process you will make weak, naïve decisions. You might conclude that you "don't have enough evidence" when in fact you do, or that you "can't be sure of things" when actually you can be. I emphasise this because, if you are a sincere, genuine Christian, you are likely to feel sympathetic towards people, even if they have done you harm. The desire to extend grace and mercy to others is natural for a Christian. Indeed, it is highly correlated with being a real Christian.

I can speak with some authority on this because I have, on many occasions, had to make potentially life-changing decisions about other people. I have always hated doing it. I have always felt a strong desire to be merciful, show grace, give the benefit of the doubt, overlook wrongdoing and so on. Moreover, those instincts have never gone away. I have therefore had to learn how to restrain them, in order to make decisions in the right way. That may sound odd, but it is a valid part of what it means to show self-control when you are dealing with the wicked, or those who might be.

Self-control is not only about preventing yourself from over-reacting, but also *under*-reacting. It is not only about avoiding the excessive or premature display of your *anger*, but also of your *mercy, grace and compassion*. Let's give an example in a criminal context. Imagine a magistrate or jury is trying to decide on a man's guilt or innocence by objectively assessing the evidence against him. What if, *at that stage*, they let themselves feel sorry for him, or considered the impact of a guilty verdict on his life, or his children's lives? They could end up making wrong decisions.

If a judge did it, rather than a jury, we would say he had 'misdirected himself'. The right time to allow feelings to play a part, and to extend grace or mercy to the man on trial, is after a verdict has been *delivered*, not while his guilt or innocence is still being decided upon. That is when the court turns its mind, *for the first time*, to the question of what to do about his crime and how to handle him. At that stage, when deciding whether to let him off with community service and probation, or to impose a prison sentence, it is right to ask whether mercy should be shown.

It is also clearly right at that stage, but not before, to consider the impact of a prison sentence on his wife and children, or on his elderly parents and so on. But it would be wholly wrong to be thinking of the impact on such people of a guilty verdict while they are still trying to decide whether or not the defendant is actually *guilty*. Likewise, while you are still at the stage of deciding what has happened, whether or not a person has done something, whether evidence is reliable and so on, force yourself to be purely objective, factual and unemotional.

You'll probably still have to force yourself to do that, even on the twentieth time you handle such a situation, because the desire to show mercy is very strong, and it doesn't go away. At least it hasn't gone away in my case. Therefore I have had to learn how to anticipate it and control it for the sake of the innocent bystanders, whose interests I must also bear in mind, as well as those of the person I am investigating or disciplining. That is what I mean when I say that we must even exercise self-control in how we show grace and mercy and in deciding *not* to punish people.

The delicate question of how much to tell other people when someone has behaved badly. Should you speak openly or keep it confidential?

A vexed problem, with which I have wrestled for years, is how much I can allow myself to say about a wrongdoer after they have been confronted, expelled, sacked or otherwise tackled. For many years, my policy was that I ought to behave like an absolute gentleman and keep it all highly confidential. I felt I had no right to tell others what that person had done, or why I had needed to sack them. I gradually learned that it is neither wise, nor necessary, to operate in that way and that we are not always under a duty to keep everything quiet.

Indeed, such silence frequently plays into the hands of the wrongdoer and leaves the floor entirely to them. Then the only version of events that other people get to hear about at work, or in the church, is what they are told by the wrongdoer, or his friends. They hear nothing from you, because you are keeping your mouth firmly shut, like an officer and a gentleman. The problem is that such dignified silence is only ever understood by other ‘officers and gentlemen’, who have faced the same issues and responsibilities. Your silence will be completely misinterpreted by everyone else.

It may even be seen as evidence of your guilt, or that you are doing something sinister. Those around you will be ‘helped’ to form those conclusions by the wrongdoer, his allies and the demons. They will all whisper those false thoughts into their minds. By misguidedly remaining silent, I allowed many a wrongdoer to multiply the original wrong that he did by leaving the floor free for him and his supporters. They were then the only ones ‘broadcasting’ and were free to tell lies, plant fear and suspicion into people’s minds, and turn them away from me. Very gradually, I began to relax my policy and reveal a little more.

At first I decided, as a concession, that I would not *initiate* any conversation, but would allow myself to answer people’s questions *if they asked me*. That seemed fair to me at the time, but I learned that very few people ever do ask you any questions in such situations. They rely solely on what the wrongdoer, or his allies, have told them. They won’t make any direct enquiries, least of all with you. So I came to the view that that was too restrictive and that I needed to allow myself far more freedom to speak, so as to properly explain and justify my actions.

There are many reasons why even the sincere, decent people, whom you are seeking to protect, will listen only to the wrongdoer and won’t ask you for your version of events. The wrongdoer makes a big effort to put himself around the workplace or church and to lobby people. He gets to them first, without waiting to be asked. Then he gives them a convincing story, laced with fragments of truth or half-truth, to make it sound more credible. Most will immediately believe what he says. Thus, from their perspective, they already have the story, and don’t need to ask you to tell it to them again.

It doesn’t occur to them that what they’ve been told could be a lie. They see no need to check anything because they already ‘know’ it’s true. The wrongdoer will often also plant a further lie into their minds, alongside the main lie, to create a reason why they ought not to check what they’ve been told. Usually it is along the lines that they are sharing it “*in confidence*” or “*as a favour*”, and that it may get them “*into trouble*” if any questions are asked. In addition, the wrongdoer will inject into their minds a basis for fearing that they too will be treated badly if they ask you questions.

Alternatively, the by-standers may feel it is none of their business and that you would approach them directly if you wanted to say anything. They feel it’s not their place to question you. Lastly, lies are inherently more believable than truth, partly due to our sin nature and also because the demons are ‘helping’ people to believe the lies and not to believe the truth. Thus, there is an inbuilt tendency to believe the wrongdoer rather than the innocent party. Therefore, the reality is that most people in the workplace or church will never approach you and say:

“I’ve been hearing some very odd things from Fred Bloggs. He says you mistreated him, and did X,Y,Z to him. Is that true? May I hear your version of events, so that any errors, lies or distortions can be

identified and corrected?” Only the most exceptionally discerning of people would ever go to see you and say that. 99% of people will just sit back and say nothing until you approach them. It ought not to be so, but it is, and you need to recognise that fact or you will let liars be the only people who ever talk to your staff, church members or colleagues about what is going on.

As a result of many bitter experiences, I have discovered that after I have tackled a wrongdoer, I need to speak to all the staff or church members, as a group. I then make a brief statement, giving the basic facts of what the wrongdoer did, why it mattered, what I have done about it, and what has happened to, or been done to, the wrongdoer. I won't necessarily tell them the whole story. That would often be inappropriate and may also take too long. It may even put ideas into other people's minds as to how they could do similar wicked things themselves.

You may think that such imitation is improbable, but I have seen it happen, and have myself put wicked ideas into people's heads, simply by explaining what another wrongdoer did. Having told the people the basic facts, you might close by saying something along these lines: *“That's the basic position. I expect it will be sufficient for most of you. However, if anyone has any questions or anxieties, or if you have heard, or begin to hear, anything different, do feel free to come and see me. You can raise any questions you may have and I will consider what else I can disclose to you.”*

If you do this, you may prevent many problems arising. You will have nipped the problem in the bud, rather than letting it develop. You will also have given people the truth *before they hear the lie*. That will reduce, though not entirely eliminate, the chances of their believing any lies that they then hear. It will also gradually increase their trust and confidence in you, because they will come to see how you act.

In summary, whereas you might see your own silence and confidentiality as very proper, and even noble, that is not how others will see it. Many will see it as *suspicious and sinister* that you haven't said anything. Then, even if the wrongdoer wasn't spreading any lies, which he will be, the people will use their own imaginations. They will invent all the missing facts which you have chosen not to share with them and create all sorts of fanciful ideas which would cause you deep dismay if you ever came to hear of them. That said, you probably won't, because they won't tell you.