

## Love Always Presumes a Person is Innocent Until Proven Guilty

The Bible can be used to establish whether a behavior or attitude is sinful or not. For example, if a brother owes another brother for a service rendered, we can point to Leviticus 9:13 which states, “*Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.*” From this, we conclude it is wrong to withhold wages from someone who earned them by working for us. Before considering a few specific laws, it may be profitable to consider a very broad summary statement made by Jesus, “*Do unto others what you would have them do to you.*” According to Jesus, this statement sums up the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12).

Perhaps because this statement has been quoted so often, it has become merely a platitude rather than something we meditate about each time our love for others is being tested. We do well to pay more attention to this statement and attempt to use it whenever we hear an accusation about another brother. When we hear an accusation against another brother who is not present, we should ask ourselves, “Would I like it if someone was accusing me to others while I am not present? Would I like it if those who hear the accusation simply accepted it as true without checking out the situation or at least coming to speak with me?” Wouldn’t you rather that a person finds out what you have to say and withhold judgment until he hears all the facts? Since this is how you would like to be treated, then according to Jesus, you should never accept an accusation about another person without convincing evidence and without giving him an opportunity to defend himself.

In the first epistle to the Corinthian church, Paul describes how Christian love behaves towards others. “*Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres*” (1 Corinthians 13:7). Other translations use the phrase “*Love believes all things.*” Here Paul indicates that Christian love produces a favorable disposition towards others. This disposition is not cynical; it never assumes another person is guilty of sin without guilt being firmly established. Interestingly, the judicial system of the United States was originally based upon this teaching of the Bible. If charged with a crime, a person is assumed to be innocent until proven guilty. This concept did not originate with the writings of Paul or the United States judicial system. It is clearly taught in the law recorded by Moses.

*“If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the girl because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man’s wife. You must purge the evil from among you. But if out in the country a man happens to meet a girl pledged to be married and rapes her, only the man who has done this shall die. Do nothing to the girl; she has committed no sin deserving death. This case is like that of someone who attacks and murders his neighbor, for the man found the girl out in the country, and though the betrothed girl screamed, there was no one to rescue her”* (Deuteronomy 22:23-27).

In reality, the girl may have consented to have sexual intercourse with the man but the Bible teaches that we must assume she resisted. We are to believe the best about her and not assume that she sinned. This passage goes on to paint a scenario about the situation that suggests the reader believe that the girl screamed but no one was around to rescue her. In this way, we are to exercise love towards the girl by believing the best about her and pushing any evil thought toward her out of our minds. From other passages in the Bible, we can see how this principle is foundational to how we are to love others. For example, during the process of restoration described in Matthew 18:15-17, the person guilty of sinning is presumed innocent by those outside the conflict until other witnesses establish guilt. Until and unless proven guilty, the matter is to be kept private in order to protect the person’s reputation and all Christians around him are to assume he is completely innocent of any charges. They are prohibited from being suspicious of the brother. Any outsider that presumes guilt is himself guilty of having a hateful, condemning spirit that itself is included in the sins listed in Galatians 5:19-21. No outsider is at liberty to assume a brother is guilty of an accusation unless and until guilt has been clearly established and the accused is allowed to defend himself against the charge. Jonathon Edwards wrote about this:

*Second, consider whether in your conversation with others, you do not accustom yourselves to evil speaking. How common is it for persons, when they meet together, to sit and spend their time in talking against others, judging this or that of them, spreading ill and uncertain reports which they have heard of them, running down one and another, and ridiculing their infirmities! How much is such sort of talk as this the entertainment of companies when they meet together! And what talk is there which seems to be more entertaining, to which persons will more listen, and in which they will seem to be more engaged, than such talk! You cannot but know how common this is.*

*Therefore examine whether you be not guilty of this. — And can you justify it? Do you not know it to be a way of sin, a way which is condemned by many rules in the Word of God? Are you not guilty of eagerly taking up any ill report which you hear of your neighbor, seeming to be glad that you have some news to talk of, with which you think others will be entertained? Do you not often spread ill reports which you hear of others, before you know what ground there is for them? Do you not take a pleasure in being the reporter of such news? Are you not wont to pass a judgment concerning others, or their behavior, without talking to them, and hearing what they have to say for themselves? Doth not that folly and shame belong to you which is spoken of in Pro. 18:13, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him”*

*This is utterly an inquiry, a very unchristian practice, which commonly prevails, that men, when they hear or know of any ill of others, will not do a Christian part, in going to talk with them about it, to reprove them for it, but will get behind their backs before they open their mouths, and there are very forward to speak, and to judge, to the hurt of their neighbor’s good name. Consider whether you be not guilty of this. Consider also how apt you are to be displeased when you hear that others have been talking against you! How forward are you to apply the rules, and to think and tell how they ought first to have come and talked with you about it, and not to have gone and spread an ill report of you, before they knew what you had to say in your vindication! How ready are persons to resent it, when others meddle with their private affairs, and busy themselves, and judge, and find fault, and declaim against them! How ready are they to say, it is no business of theirs! Yet are you not guilty of the same?<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Jonathon, The Works of Jonathon Edwards Vol. II, The Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA 1986, p.181 & 182