

## My Bad

Matthew 7:1-5

(Jesus teaches us to consider the ‘speck’ in one’s own eye as one looks at others.)

This week one of you was asking about how we can access audio or printed copies of sermons from our church’s web site, and I was getting a little confused about which sermon the questioner was referring to. To clarify, I said, do you mean “My Bad” sermon? Then I heard what I had said and thought aloud, “Gee, I sure hope *you all* don’t refer to today’s sermon as “My Bad” one!

Phrases that catch on have a way of capsulating a lot, even theological viewpoints, in very few words.

Today we’re focusing upon the dilemma that occurs when we, or someone else, make a mistake—and how it is possible to recoup *the relationship* after the mistake.

“My Bad” is a contemporary two-word phrase that communicates all this: “I know, it is my fault. I made a mistake”

I vividly recall the first time I heard this phrase, for it made a big impression on me. Our daughter was playing spring soccer on a girls’ team; the girls were probably 16 or so. One girl who was playing left mid-field missed a ball that was passed to her, so the ball went out-of-bounds. She said, to her teammates, “My Bad.”

I thought that was nice of her to acknowledge it was her mistake. She was not blaming the girl who passed the ball to her. Since I had never heard the expression before, I thought the phrase was the girl’s own invention.

A little while later in the game this girl missed another ball, and again she said, “My Bad.”

A little later she *kicked* the ball poorly and said, “My Bad.”

I began to wonder how many times in one game she’d acknowledge a mistake with that phrase. I also began to wonder whether she was *trying any harder*.

John tells me that in his days of playing pick-up basketball, the phrase was “My fault.” That is, if a basketball player made a pass and the ball didn’t reach its intended teammate, the passer said “My fault.” John tells me, too, that we can see on players on TV simply gesturing, [point to self], which means, “my bad.” When the player points to another, that means, “Thanks, good pass. Yes, I made the basket, but it was because you passed it so well.”

A month or so ago I was shocked at the strong emotions several people were expressing as they discussed this very phrase, “My Bad.” Evidently a lot of people do not like the phrase, for it seems to connote to them a way-too-fast acknowledgement *and dismissal* of a mistake. The perception of those who do not like the phrase seems to be that people say, “My Bad,” then apparently do very little to redress their mistake.

When I first heard the phrase, I thought it was an honest expression of fault. I saw it as not blaming another. However, I did notice that the soccer player repeated her mistakes.

A little while ago I noticed a cartoon in the newspaper that showed a picture of an object that looked like an “ipod.” The caption read: “iBad. Holds over 1000 excuses.”<sup>1</sup>

Is it enough, when we realize we’ve done something wrong, to say, “My Bad” or “My fault” or maybe to point to ourselves? Isn’t it at least better than saying, “Your bad”?

If it is not enough to say “My Bad,” *what would* be “enough”?  
What else is expected?

Our Scripture passage today is quite familiar, so familiar that we can get so used to the comparison made by Jesus between seeing another’s fault and seeing our own that we become rather immune to the “grotesqueness” of the image. We are, Jesus points out, sometimes so preoccupied with a fault of another, the “speck” in their eyes, that we don’t even realize that logs are dangling out of our own.

Think about this in context. Jesus expected the “last judgment” to be coming soon. He was teaching people not to judge others without looking at themselves first. He was calling people to live *now* as they would in the new kingdom that was to come. Jesus was painting an ideal picture in which we would be quite hesitant to identify others’ faults; we would be more attentive to our own.

A marvelous theologian who teaches at Yale Divinity School is a native Croatian who has first-hand experience with the intensity of war between Croats and Serbs in what was formerly Yugoslavia. He used a phrase which caught my attention: “The arithmetic of sin.” The arithmetic of sin. He talked of calculating or comparing sins, and he made a powerful observation. People on one side in a war are overwhelmed by the wickedness of their “enemy.” Yet that very enemy sees *themselves* as good and the first side as evil. He observes that “in a world so . . . drenched with evil everybody is innocent in their own eyes. . .”<sup>2</sup>

We humans obviously need to face this “arithmetic of sin” on the big scale of nations and wars. However, I want to focus on the individual level, for I think we have plenty to ponder here and what we do on a small scale affects how we think about the big picture.

If a friend of ours hangs up on us, or whatever would be the equivalent with “twittering,” “I’aming,” or “email,” we are most likely to consider that behavior “their bad.” Perhaps we get back at them, by not answering their next 5 calls, twitters, I’ams, or emails. They consider that “our bad.”

Maybe someone in our family gets a speeding ticket—50 mph in a 35 mph zone. Because of all the consequences—cost, limits on driving, etc. we’re pretty upset at this “bad.” However, we realize that we are really lucky that *we* have not been caught, not only for speeding, but also for driving when we were too sleepy or even under the influence.

You fill in the blank for “bads” you deal with.

Well, what are we supposed to do with people who hang up on us or get a ticket and say to us “My Bad”? On the other side of the fence, if we’re the one who got the ticket or the one who hung up first, and we want to make it right, is it enough that we acknowledge our mistake, that is, to say “My Bad”? **How do the two parties get *beyond* the bad?**

What else is needed beyond acknowledging the error?

First, we expect, and most Christian theologians, starting with Jesus, would agree, we need to change our behavior, or at least work hard to. The mid-fielder on the soccer field kept repeating her errors. I do not *know* whether she *was* trying harder. I did not know whether she would practice passing and receiving a lot before her next game. Shaq certainly must work very hard to make more free throws; surely he practices them, but he still misses a lot.

If we make a mistake, perhaps we hurt someone, we're expected to change, to make an effort at change. It's not sufficient to keep saying "My Bad" as we do the same thing over and over and over. That is, if we *can* change.

Second, Christians tend to believe we should feel sorry, really regret what we've done, not just to mouth words. Yet, it's very hard to know how another feels, isn't it?

It's quite easy to have an incident in which different people who have been hurt come to quite different conclusions about whether the person who is at fault "means" they are sorry or not.

Often, we collectively are amazingly tolerant of a mistake if a person—a public official or an athlete, for example—admits it and convinces us he or she regrets it.

First, we expect an acknowledgment of "our bad"; second, we are expected to feel sorry, to have regret or remorse. There's usually a third step expected. We believe that the person at fault should "make amends," that is, to fix whatever they can fix. For example, we are expected to pay for something we've broken. In religion we sometimes call it "penance."

A very positive consequence of religious "Confession" is that we can actually begin again! Pastor Karen said to us this morning, after our congregational confession, "In the name and spirit of Christ, we are forgiven!" In other words, we're not labeled "bad" forever. One "my bad" isn't supposed to haunt me all the rest of my life.

We confess our sins, and we accept pardon. This assumes that between the confession and the pardon, we genuinely regret and intend to do better.

Sometimes, however, in our relationships we act as if there is *nothing whatsoever* that one who did "bad" can do to get right in our eyes ever again. That's quite understandable if we're really hurt.

It's quite a conundrum. **How do we balance grace and forgiveness with repentance and penance?** Sometimes we have a choice between two roads to take.

If you were to play tennis with me—either the tennis that's played on a court or table tennis—I would be saying "My bad" quite often. I'd apologize each time you went chasing after the ball that I didn't hit well.

I would actually *mean* I am sorry, but I confess I will not improve much. Perhaps if I worked really hard, I could improve. But I don't really care enough to put much energy into it.

Given this, you could choose between two roads. If you want to play tennis with me, you'd pretty much need to accept my quality of play and go chasing after my balls, even if I apologize each time. Or, you could say, "Carolyn, I like you in general, but I don't really want to play tennis with you." I would accept that, because I'm not willing to do the penance I'd need to, that is, practice, in order to really mean that I'm sorry.

Translating these options to more important matters, we have the same two choices.

Our choice, which sure takes lots of soul-searching and prayers on our part is: 1) To conclude that we cannot tolerate their behavior that they will not or cannot change. 2) To decide that, given our realization that they are not going to change, we'll look beyond that fault.

The coach of the soccer mid-fielder who kept missing passes had to decide, given many factors, whether to play her less often? Would he look beyond that problem and focus on what she does well?

These can be critical choices in our lives, and I can think of quite a number of circumstances that could lead someone to say, “Enough with your ‘My Bad’s! I need change.” This is especially true if someone is being hurt in some way so consistently that they’ve lost trust. Even though God’s love is unconditional, we humans have the right to some genuine and clear conditions.

However, I can also think of plenty of situations in which we would conclude that it’s unfair spiritually to keep a dunce cap on another, to keep them in the corner, or to keep them writing their name on the board—that is, punishing them—forever about something that they seem unable, perhaps unwilling, to change. We might declare inside our own souls, “I’ll accept the person as he or she is, with this behavior that I call a fault.” After all, I have a log or two in my own eyes, as well.

If we’re the one who did bad, we confess, “I have some stuff in my eye.” We feel sorry; that doesn’t mean we have to be depressed or beat ourselves up over it. Yet, we wisely discern what we can change, and we take steps to make the change, getting help if we need it.

Whether we’re dealing with someone else’s “sawdust” or our own “logs,” whether we are able to do this together or just on our own side of the fence, *naming, feeling sorry, and making changes* is a way of affirming about *the relationship that we have a future; we have a future not burdened by the past*. God’s grace is Unconditional. We’re loved no matter what.

You know what? God loves us even if we’ve been preoccupied with the specks in the eyes of others while having a log dangling out of our own!

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<sup>1</sup> I recall a couple decades ago when the movie “Love Story” was quite famous, there was a lot of discussion over the phrase, “I’m sorry,” for one of the famous lines in that rather simple movie was “Love means never having to say, you’re sorry.” There was a similarly strong emotional reaction to that line in the movie as there is now to “My Bad.”

<sup>2</sup> Volf, Miroslav, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996, 79.