

The Bad Report
Sharon W. Betters
Today's Treasure

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.
Proverbs 18:17

The bad report about a friend stunned me. Without hesitation, I believed it. Anger, sadness, disappointment, all of those emotions followed me around the house as I prepared for a busy day of running errands and catching up on undone tasks. I threw my purse and library books into the car, made sure I had my to-do list, and started to back out of the driveway.

That morning I had read Psalms 32 and 33, and was struck by a picture of God's love resting on me and surrounding me. I had committed to viewing the circumstances of that day through the grid of God's surrounding love. I was eager to see how practical the presence of God's love would be in every day details. Frankly, I looked forward to a warm, fuzzy intimacy with Him, maybe a parking space in the crowded mall, a great price for a purchase...you know, fun things. God's agenda differed from mine.

Before I turned onto our street, something other worldly happened. I heard a voice or a thought: I'm not sure exactly what it was, "Sharon, my love rests on you. My love surrounds you. How will my truth change the way you respond to this bad report?" Yes, God had another agenda, my first opportunity that morning to choose God's way, not mine. Was my friend guilty as charged? What was the evidence? Another person's words? What was the "reporter's" agenda? Before you rebuke me for listening to gossip, the "reporter" wasn't gossiping. Trust me on that. Another Scripture came to mind:

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.
Proverbs 18:17

For over forty years I've been a pastor's wife, and I'm confident many bad reports have been shared about my husband's ministry. I'm just as sure many are the words spoken about my own fallacies and miss-steps. I've always hoped that when those reports are given the hearer would step back and think, "I won't believe this until I see the evidence." At the least, I hoped for an opportunity to give our side of the story or explain our behavior or even ask forgiveness for hurting another and righting the wrong. I hoped for mercy and compassion. Yet in those first moments after hearing the bad report about my friend, I did none of those things. I jumped to judgment.

God's love surrounded me in those moments because He used the bad report as spiritual sandpaper to reveal my own dark heart. How many times have I believed a bad report about another person, with no thought for how hurt she or he would be if they knew I did not believe the best (1 Corinthians 10:13)? How many times has an unsubstantiated bad report unfairly influenced my relationship with another person? How many opportunities to share hope and help in Jesus have I missed because I pre-judged another woman? How often do I treat such reports with a casualness that diminishes the value of the other person's life?

I should know better. The Book of James tells me and I've taught it so many times: the tongue is a fire that fills the body with great evil. James gives me hope when he declares none of us can tame it, that we will stumble. But he also warns me to beware of this great potential for evil and only by God's grace can we find any victory over our tongues. I felt such guilt over my initial reaction. What to do? Repent and choose to believe the best. Fortunately, by God's grace, I had not repeated this bad report to anyone else.

You may wonder if the initial bad report was true. For this discussion, it doesn't matter. What matters is in that moment God's love gave me a choice: automatically believe the worst or choose to withhold judgment until all the evidence is in. And even then, is judgment my responsibility? That's how I hope others will treat me, and I know my friends hope I will protect them similarly.

God's love surrounds me whether I treat others with compassion or not. And sometimes that love is the voice of discipline as my Father takes my face in His hands and rebukes me for choosing evil over His righteousness. May God and my friends have mercy on me as I continue to learn what it means to be His daughter.

Originally posted on Treasures of Encouragement blog, January 22, 2013