



## ***EXCUSE ME!***

*By Paul Anderson*

An article was posted on AOL recently called, "15 Excuses for Calling in Sick." Need a day off?

- "I was poisoned by my mother-in-law."
- "I was feeling all the symptoms of my pregnant wife."
- "I broke my leg snowboarding off the roof while drunk."
- "A skunk got into our house and sprayed all my uniforms."

*(from Richard Castellini, Senior Career Advisor for CareerBuilder)*

Outrageous? Then listen to these:

Aaron, caught by Moses with an idol calf, says, "So I told them [the people], 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

When Jesus asked a paralyzed man if he wanted to get well, one might have expected a positive response after thirty-eight years of sickness. Instead he complains, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

Two would-be followers of Jesus, not ready to sign on the line, give excuses for their reticence, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." And another, "First let me go back and say good-bye to my family."

### **Who? Me?**

When the LR Board met with me after my first year on the team, I prepared to defend our struggling financial situation—with excuses. When I failed to honor an agreement I had once made with a friend, an excuse popped into my mind before honesty.

Excuses often arise on the heels of God's call. Moses tried a handful: "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (He sure got God with that one.) "What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you'?" "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." Finally, "O Lord, please send someone else to do it."

Jeremiah, a reluctant prophet, said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." And what did the Lord do with these excuses? "The Lord's anger burned against Moses" (Ex 4:14). Apparently, He doesn't like

listening to excuses. He perhaps bent over with laughter at Aaron's claim. With Jeremiah, God told him that he didn't have an option. Then He touched Jeremiah and put His words in his mouth.

Jesus pulled the rug out from under the paralyzed man—He healed him. Then He rebuked his bad attitude. And Jesus didn't tolerate the reluctant disciples. He told one, "Let the dead bury their own dead." To the other He said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." We might have been more "understanding" with these prospects, not wanting to lose a good deal. But Jesus saw a mentality that would cripple them all their lives.

### ***Cheap Talk***

So are you prone like me to excuse-giving? When it's time to confess, do we give an explanation to lower our guilt level? Would we do better under other circumstances, with other people, at another time, when we aren't so tired? "I'm having a bad day." "I have a headache." "You'd understand if you had a boss like mine." "If only I hadn't...gone bankrupt, flunked out, married this jerk...I wouldn't be in this situation." "I don't have the gifting for this."

DC Talk took this theme for one of their songs:

*I keep trying to find a life,  
on my own, apart from you  
I am the king of excuses,  
I've got one for every selfish thing I do.*

Could you picture Jesus ever giving an excuse? "Leaving heaven for earth means too big a step down." "My Father is asking too much of me." "It really isn't fair." "I relate much better with people in heaven." "What is in it for me?" Not even close. We might understand His reluctance, but He counted the cost and paid the price, and He expects us to do the same. Excuses trivialize our high calling. Why lower the bar with lame explanations? (Do you hear me preaching to myself?)

### **How Serious Are Excuses?**

When I feel judged or called to account, pride easily kicks in and wants to save face, so my first knee-jerk defensive posture searches out an explanation in the hope that I won't look that bad. I don't realize that all too often I am making light of sin, and, therefore, also of the cross which deals with sin. Jesus didn't die for my excuses; He died for my iniquity. To lighten my guilt compromises forgiveness. To pull the bar

down so that I can achieve it tampers with the work of redemption, which says clearly that we can't do anything without Christ. To make excuses somehow presupposes perfection, as if to say, "I'm not usually like this, but I messed up this time. It was an exception."

Excuses often subtly or overtly point the finger at someone else to deflect blame. Adam excused his behavior by charging Eve, who passed the buck on to the serpent. But they all came under God's scrutiny and judgment. We don't live well with the eye of judgment. So we must decide: Do I own up or excuse, repent or run, come into the light or remain in the darkness? An excuse arises as a form of self-justification, which is ultimately a way of salvation. I either run to the cross and find justification outside of myself, or I look inside and come up with a cheap alternative. People who live in the shadow of the cross and who walk in the power of the blood of Christ are learning that excuses cannot match an honest confession. A confession opens the door for forgiveness. An excuse does not yield forgiveness because it does not accept responsibility. No crime—no absolving. So an excuse short-circuits our greatest need—to walk humbly in the power of the cross.

The word "excuse" comes from a compound "ex," from plus "causa," a *cause or charge*. So an excuse is advanced to free us from an indictment. The charge comes from within or without. If the boss says, "You're late again," we might feel a need to exonerate ourselves or at least to minimize the guilt with a reason.

So is there a place for giving a reason rather than excusing our irresponsibility? Yes, if a reason is not intended to save face, to defend ourselves, or to relieve us from responsibility, but if it is intended rather to strengthen a relationship through an explanation, it could work. For instance, one might say, "I am sorry for what I said. I need your forgiveness. I would not want you to think by my words that I devalue our relationship."

Some of our theological assumptions bring on unconscious excuses. Martin Luther called Christians "simul iustus et peccator" (both saint and sinner), a statement of truth that nevertheless can give us the excuse to keep on sinning. After all, we can't walk perfectly, right? So we set the bar lower than Scripture does.

We confess accurately that the kingdom of God is both now and not yet. That leaves the door open to lean on the "not yet" and not press for all that God has in the now. We believe that we need to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." But we don't want unholy fire arising from our own heart's altar rather than God's, so we repent less than we should. The same goes for fasting with our praying. We must be careful, lest our theology excuse our lukewarmness.

If you hear yourself say, "I am sorry, but..." listen for an alibi, not an apology. We are robbing our confession of power by playing it safe, covering over our error. In effect, we are doing what John tells us not to do: "If we say that we have

no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Truth is moral, not simply factual. And the truth is that tacking an excuse on the end of an apology makes it a defense. It neutralizes the impact of a confession. It takes no guts to make an excuse. I know that—in my head. I need it to leak down into my heart.

### Excuse Me!

To overcome excuse-giving, I want to learn to:

**Take the low road.** In an atmosphere of grace, excuses diminish and vulnerability grows. The more we value relationships, the less likely we will excuse our irresponsible behavior. Excuses come often in a climate of judgment. Sin is more often called sin in an environment of grace and acceptance than when judgment fills the air. Let's admit it: we don't like the excuses of others—so let's not give them ourselves. They don't work with God, nor with people. Pilate washed his hands in innocence, but the court of heaven pronounced a different verdict. I hereby commit to quit excusing the way I live, the way I procrastinate, the way I take up offenses. I prefer to die to myself rather than talking about others. Join me if you will: let's use a critical word aimed at us to go low rather than retaliating.

**Walk in accountability**—and agree to hold others accountable. "How kind of a friend to say to us, "That sure sounded like an excuse to me." A wound is created by a cut, and some cuts go deep. Our first response might be to respond in anger, but "faithful are the wounds of a friend." Don't let yourself off the hook, and don't let others off the hook either if they are served better by the truth. You may be the standard they need to rise higher. When a Norwegian lady told a visiting speaker of her separation from her husband, she said that her family encouraged her to divorce him. "And what do you think?" asked the pastor. "Well, my family says that I have a right to be happy." "So what do you want me to say?" "Well I'm not sure." "Yes you are. You know what is right. Divorce him and you give your children the message that they can quit their marriage if they are unhappy. Or you can tell them that your promise meant something and give them a legacy of faithfulness."

Ultimately, we cry out to God to change us. In our insecurity, we run from the light rather than into it. But if we walk in the light, we receive something much better than an excuse—we receive a pardon. Far better to acknowledge our sin and receive forgiveness than to make an excuse and receive a rebuke. May we access the grace available and move beyond excuses to trustworthiness. Don't you enjoy friends who have moved from defensiveness to vulnerability?! Then let's walk like that friend.

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