



Sacred Echoes

Part 3 – Trusted Voices & If

Pastor Ted Cunningham & Adam Donyes

Ted Cunningham: Today, we are in Part 3. We're trying something new. How many of you love Ted Talks? How many of you not so much? Nobody; okay. Everybody is like, "The shorter the sermon, the better. We've always thought that." For this week and next week, you're going to hear from multiple members of the teaching team as we talk about Sacred Echoes. Remember that a sacred echo is God's Word showing up in unexpected places at unexpected times and God using his Word, through you, to minister to others and how God uses his Word to minister to you from others.

We've been sharing that and looking forward to hearing the stories from you through the series. We started it with *Walk Away*, walking away, finding freedom from toxic people. We've heard from a lot of you who the Lord has already been working in your life for months, if not years, on how to handle the toxic people in your life. I love this question and there is a lot of sensitivity in this question that people walked away from the first part of this series with. They are asking this question: "What if I'm the toxic person. I don't want to be a toxic person." Raise your hand if you want to be a toxic person. Nobody wants to be a toxic person.

I've been talking to Gary Thomas and we've been going back and forth a little bit. He wrote the book, *When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People*. He watched the first part of the series.

I said, "I love the slow process that our congregation is going through with this." Remember we said walking away is not a first step. And walking away is not a fast process. We talked about how Jesus walked away from people or allowed them to walk away from him without chasing after them.

Some of you started asking the question: "Am I a toxic person?" I submit to you that if you have the awareness and the sensitivity to ask such a question, chances are you're not. Toxic people are not asking, "Am I toxic?" But people are saying we need to do better.

I know we looked at five people we need to walk away from; the scripture is very clear on walking away from. But, could you give us a definition. The definition is tough. Even Gary Thomas says it's tough. He says, "*Is there a single definition for a toxic person? No. But there are often common traits that might align: selfishness, draining of joy, jealous, spiteful, etc. The list could go on. The one real commonality – this they share in common across the board – that they share is their mission to take you and your purpose down.*"

We said walking away protects your sanity and your sleep, but we also focused on this idea of ministry effectiveness. We believe this here at this church at the core of who we are. We believe every member is a minister. You have been called to minister, to care for other people. Sacred echo is “What is God teaching you in his word, how will he use that through you and through your life to minister to other people?” When you get sidetracked from that mission, from your purpose is what we’re talking about today, but we’re not talking about the toxicity just in an individual, but we are specifically focusing on that toxicity that we find when we become quarrelsome, when we want a fight.

Paul, a trusted voice in the life of Timothy, said this in 2 Timothy 2: 3-4, ***Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.*** Can I see the hands of all the soldiers? If you served, would you just raise your hand. I know we just came out of Veteran’s Day, but I want to see the soldiers because they are going to get this illustration here. ***No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs; he wants to please his commanding officer.***

You and I cannot afford to waste time. We cannot be sidetracked by quarrels, by nonsense, by people who are wanting to pick fights and inviting you to a fight. We talked about this. You don’t have to show up to every fight you’re invited to. When we do... We said this in Part 1 of the series. Some of you are going home for Thanksgiving or Christmas to a toxic relative. And you know that person is going to knock you out for days or weeks after you leave. Today, we’re talking about foolish and stupid arguments and how they creep into the church and they find their way into the church and if you and I are not careful, we’ll engage and be sidetracked. We’ll lose our focus and our purpose and our mission. A good soldier stays focused.

I was in Colorado Springs, a military town, on Friday night. I was doing Date Night Comedy. I had a lady come up to me and she was in tears. She said, “My husband just came home from deployment and he’s been home for two months. Tonight was so good because this is the first time in two months that I’ve heard him laugh.”

Let me tell you why. When a soldier is doing his job, when a soldier is fighting, when a soldier is going door to door in Afghanistan or door to door in Iraq, they can’t lose focus. They cannot be sidetracked, mentally, emotionally. They have a job that they’ve been assigned to do and they’ve got to stay on target. And you and I have a job to do.

In 2 Timothy, a little further down from enduring hardship as a good soldier, Paul is going to give Timothy a trusted voice and he’s going to encourage him. “What I have left you to do there, stay focused.” It’s the same idea he gives to Titus, who he left in Crete. “Listen, too much to do... You have to establish elders, keep the church going, the gospel has to go out. Don’t get caught up in divisiveness. Don’t get caught up in foolish and stupid argument.”

Here’s what he’s going to say in 2 Timothy 2: 22-26, ***Flee the evil desires of youth...*** Your translation may say the evil passions of youth. *Passions* there, most scholars believe it’s not speaking of lust, but of the youthful desires of self-assertion, competitiveness, the desire to win an argument. And all the young people said... Let’s try it again. The desire to win an argument and be right. And all young people, including myself... I’m kind of middle aged, but all of us said... Amen.

He says you have to flee all that ***and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.*** Watch Verse 23. ***Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.*** And the word that Paul uses for *quarrels* in this passage, the original word is a military term and it means hand to hand combat.

I love that picture because that's what we're doing. "I'm coming at you. I'm going to do it online; I'm going to do it here in the church. If we disagree on something, let's go, let's mix it up." Paul is telling Timothy, "If you do, you will become quarrelsome and you'll become ineffective." There is too much to do.

Verse 24, ***And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome...*** This is my sacred echo. Why? Because being quarrelsome is fun. How many of you enjoy mixing it up? Just be really honest. Raise your hand. The first service lied through their teeth. I follow about 800 of you online, so raise your hand if you enjoy mixing it up. Let me see you. Yes, thank you. It can be fun. You're going home for the holidays and some of you have that relative you just can't wait to pick a fight with. You know what pushes that person's buttons and that's what you want to do, and then walk away. You're like, *Okay, let's just see how they deal with that for a little bit.* We have to guard because quarrelsome people are ineffective, quarrelsome people are off mission, quarrelsome people forget their purpose. ***...but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.***

Verse 25, ***Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil...*** the democrats... See what I just did right there. That was fun, but that was wrong. It was fun, but it was wrong; it was quarrelsome. I wanted to give you a set example. Some of you are like, "It wasn't quarrelsome; it was truth!" It was wrong. I just picked a fight because it was fun. Now, how many of you enjoy that kind of fun? Yeah, see, all the MAGA, MAGAs out there... But that's not how we're supposed to be.

We're on mission, as servants of the Lord, we are calling people out and at this church, we're calling people to repentance and sometimes we get sidetracked like we just did. We get sidetracked with foolish and stupid arguments. And some of you this week, you brought no one loser to Christ because your thoughts were 100% on impeachment. Now some of you are ready; you want to fight. You'll come up to me after... What's your mission? What have you been called to do? ***...who has taken them captive to do his will.*** Here's what Paul knows and he's wanting to get through to Timothy in a crystal-clear message.

Foolish and stupid arguments are roadblocks to ministry effectiveness. May our church not be marked by them. **The Lord's servant seeks to win people not arguments.** We're going after the hearts of people not just to convince them of our political agenda. I want to win the heart of my wife, not the argument. I'll say that one more time. I got on amen from a man who has had a rough morning. I want to win the heart of my wife, not an argument. My wife is a leader. I was raised by a strong woman, I'm married to a strong woman, I'm raising a strong woman, and I pastor a lot of strong woman.

Every now and then, Amy will come to me, asking me for my opinion about something even going on around here like with the environments or something. She'll go, "And I really want your opinion on..." My first response is always, "Do you? Really? Let's be honest; I have to know. Do you really want it?" My wife is great at listening. She listens to my opinion. I always love this because sometimes I'm like, "I'm going to share it, but you have really kind of made up your mind." Here's how I know she has made up her mind. It's when she asks for my opinion and I go into three minutes of my opinion on the subject, the issue, or what we're doing around here, and she'll respond with, "Or..." What a word. That means "I've got another way of thinking."

But the Lord's servant seeks to win people, not arguments. And **the Lord's servant is not sidetracked by the opinions of others**. Healthy people aren't threatened by the opinions of other people. We know what we're called to do. We know what the Lord has called us to do. We have to stay focused; we have to stay on track.

Proverbs 18: 2 says this about opinions. ***A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.*** One of the sacred echoes about this for us... You've heard Adam Donyes. He speaks about this so well and it's been a sacred echo. Something he said to me... The first time he said it, I was like, "That's it!" He said, "Social media today allows us to express our opinions without sticking around for a conversation." We want to be right; we want to win arguments. And I need to get better at listening. **Listening to you doesn't mean I agree with you. Disagreeing with you doesn't mean I hate you.** I just don't want to be one that is about expressing my opinions. I'd rather listen and find out what's going on.

This is what Paul tells Timothy. **When invited to a fight, the Lord's servant approaches with peace, kindness, and gentleness.** Yeah, you don't have to show up to every fight you're invited to, but when you do show up, may it be marked with peace, kindness, and gentleness.

The question you might be asking is, "Okay, I need a list. What are the foolish and stupid arguments on the list? Give me what I should be talking about, what I shouldn't be talking about. Give me what I should be engaging with and what I should be avoiding."

I love this. I know it's a foolish and stupid agreement when someone will ask my wife a question and she responds with, "Ted, what do we believe about that again?" That's like her cue of saying "This doesn't matter to me. I've got something I'm supposed to be doing and this is a distraction." Or, she'll say, "Yeah, I think I know what we believe on this, but I'm just going to defer to Ted on this one." My wife is not really into hand to hand combat as much as I like to be. I've got to back up and respond with peace, kindness, and gentleness.

Here's a good test. Theologian William Barkley puts it this way. *"Here then is the test. If at the end of our talk, we are closer to one another and God, then all is well; but if we have erected barriers between one another and have left barriers between one another and have left God more distant, then all is not well. The aim of all Christian discussion and of all Christian action is to bring a man nearer to his fellows and to God."* And all God's people said... Amen. We need more trusted voices. We need to move away from the hand to hand combat and listen to more trusted voices.

The Lord's servant must listen to more trusted voices and less ranting voices. Some of you right now are in hand to hand combat almost every day because you've surrounded yourself with whining, complaining, and ranting. It's time for you to walk away. It's time for you to find the trusted voices, the people that will speak into your life. Years ago, Christian publishing made a big shift. I sat in meetings where they told me and they were explaining it to me and it made sense, but for many of you, your generation grew up reading books by experts, people who had been there, done that in parenting, marriage, leadership, etc.

There was a shift about 10 to 15 years ago and the publishers will even say this to you. We moved away from reading what experts had to say and now we want to read what fellow journeyers are saying. That's great, right? Someone who is going through it with you. You may read this on blogs, watch this with YouTube influencers, you may read books from a fellow journeyer, but we still need the trusted voices. What happens is if you're surrounding yourself with people who only affirm you or you go on a rant and you're ready to pick a fight with someone and then you see it. It comes onto the comment section and everybody's joining you and affirming you. "You're right. You go get 'em. You take 'em on."

The Lord's servant needs more trusted voices and not just affirming voices. We need people that will walk alongside us and tell us, "Hey, you need to stop." "Hey, you need to change." We all want to be encouraged; we all want to be affirmed. That's great. Just don't let it be the only thing you read. You need older, wiser, more mature people in your life, speaking into your life.

Your spiritual growth will stall out if you only listen to voices that affirm, celebrate, and validate you. We also need voices calling out our blind spots. May that always be this church. We don't want to be a church where all we do is affirm you, validate you, say we know what you're going through, but may we always be a church that points you to repentance. That we call out sin for what it is. You need that. I need that trusted voice in my life.

Twelve years ago, when our church was going through one of the toughest times in the history of our church, I was in hand to hand combat with several hundred people in this town. And I was showing up for the fight. I was ready for it. There was one I was wanting to knock out. I knew I couldn't, but I wanted to. I was ready to take him out. The young men and women beside me were ready to fight with me. It was the older, trusted voices in my life that were whispering in my ear this deep, theological truth: "Shut up." It was older, wiser, more mature, trusted voices saying, "Keep your mouth shut." And I'm grateful for them. Had I only had affirming voices in my life, I probably wouldn't be here right now. But I had people who had been there, who had walked through it, seen where it was going. I had Pauls in my life.

One of my Pauls has been with the Lord for three and a half years and I still have the sacred echo from him. I still hear him almost... Maybe not on a daily basis, but every couple of days, I'll hear, "Shut up." "Keep your mouth shut." "You don't need to show up to this fight." "Put your fists down and back away." How many of you have people like that in your life and you're grateful for them? If all you have is affirming and validating voices in your life right now, you need to start looking for some trusted voices. It's great to be encouraged, but you need to be challenged and you need to be stretched as well.

I'm going to invite Adam Donyes up. Adam is going to continue. His sacred echo is *If*. You going to see how it ties in together because one of the things that I love about the study of the Word of God... Adam has been on the teaching team for about six or seven years... I've lost track. Adam is a good friend. I just love having people in my life that when they are learning something, they call me to tell me what they're learning, and I can call them and tell them what I'm learning. It's that sacred echo. "Here's what I read and here's how it correlates to what you're talking about." That's the power of the Word of God. Adam, how does your message tie in?

Adam Donyes: It ties in great. I think I love it even more that you just called all these people Maga, Maga people. I've never heard you say that, so that was awesome. I think you know this – the way God works with sacred echoes. It's just so neat how I saw your message come together and it was just there.

So, as Ted told you, the sacred echo I've been dealing with is *If*. There are a lot of ifs. I think some of you even love this ADD. I just saw some of you. I was sitting back there and you're on your phones and iWatches and everything else. I was like, *Ted Talks are brilliant because we have an ADD congregation for sure*. And I'm A to Z, so it doesn't matter.

We all play this "what if" game. You all have that uncle or that dad – "If only I didn't blow out my ACL, I would have been in NFL" or whatever. Or, "If only I didn't break my ankle, I would have gotten a D1 scholarship to the Arkansas Razorbacks and played football." But, really, who even wants to play football for the Hogs; let's be honest.

Then we play some dangerous "what ifs." "If only that person was my husband." "If only that person was my wife." "What would it be like if this person was married..." That's planting seeds of adultery. That's not ever safe and that's dangerous. There are all these different "what ifs." "What if I won the lottery? How different could life be?" We play that "what if." We think about all these different scenarios. The reality is, if we're honest, we all deal with these "what ifs."

This has been a sacred echo of mine. There are ifs in life that you and I cannot control. You can't play the "what if" game. "What if I had gone to this college instead of this college." You see Gen Z people that are paralyzed by decision because they do that. "What if this is the wrong choice?" There are some choices that we just need to make in faith and trust the ifs to God. You cannot play the "what if" game or the "if only" game. God is sovereign and he controls that.

As a matter of fact, some ifs we have to trust to God and other ifs are actually up to us. There are some ifs that we control. That's where the serenity prayer actually steps in. The serenity prayer, as some of you know, is not in the Bible. That's a whole other series about sayings we use or things we do. "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime" is also not in the Bible. The serenity prayer is also not in the Bible, but you've heard it and you've seen it on little magnets and little cards, and you've seen it all over. This is what the serenity prayer says. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and wisdom to know the difference? That word *serenity* is just peace of mind. Give me the peace of mind to accept the ifs I cannot change, to not play the "what ifs," to have the courage not to play the "what ifs." "If only my parents didn't get divorced." "If only I didn't get diagnosed with cancer..." Grant me the

courage to accept those ifs but give me the peace of mind to change the ifs I can. There are certain ifs in life that are up to us.

There is an old adage that says, "You can lead a horse to the trough, or you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." We've heard that. You can drag your kids to church, but you're not going to change their heart. You're not the agent of heart change. I'm not the agent of heart change for Aiden and Anders. I don't change their heart. I can lead them to the water, I can lead them to the well that never runs dry, but, ultimately, it becomes up to them and their decision in what they are going to do in their relationship with the Lord.

Today, I can lead you guys to this living water, I can lead you to this well, but if is up to you. What you do once you're at that water is up to you. I'm going to lead you to a place of intimacy with our Lord and Savior. I'm going to lead you to a place that will allow his voice to be heard in your life, but I can't force you, I can't make you, as a sinner myself, drink from that water. That is an if that will always and has always been up to the individual. You can't change your wife. Some of you have tried, but it doesn't work. And you can't change your husband. Many of you have tried and it just hasn't worked. The reality is that there are just some things that we have to surrender and realize that they are up to the Lord.

There is actually the word *if* in the Bible. There is no more powerful if in the entire scripture than we see in 1 John 1: 9. It's so powerful. It's the very first word of this verse. ***If...*** In the Koine Greek, that word literally means if. So, ***If we confess our sins,*** So it's something contingent. Whenever you see that if... So, if this happens, then this will take place. So that's a really big if. If we confess our sins, ***he (Jesus) is faithful and just...*** Great is his faithfulness. His mercies are new every morning. His steadfast love never ceases. Lamentations 3: 22-23. I love that it says every morning. Why? Because we need his mercy every morning. Not just on the day we came to know him, but every day. So, if this takes place, watch what else takes place. ***...to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.***

About six weeks ago, I went to Chiro, Egypt and the travel back was a 28-hour travel day. So, you can imagine after traveling 28 hours, the first thing I did when I got home... After I kissed my wife, the second thing I did when I got home was jump in the shower. It's nasty when you travel that long.

The reality is someone from your distance would not have known how yucky I was. When my wife got close for that kiss, she knew I needed to get in the shower. Sometimes, we do a good job at keeping people at bay so they can't really see how dirty we are because we don't want to confess. We don't want people to know we need to be cleansed. When you go camping or you've been out hunting, as Ted alluded to for a while, the first thing you want to do to get all that campfire smell and stink off you is jump in the shower; you want to be cleansed. Unless you're a junior high kid, you take a shower almost every day because you want to be cleansed. So, this idea of being cleansed from all unrighteousness and being purified isn't just a one-time deal. It's not just something we do one time when we come to know the Lord, it's a habit.

There is an old acronym called ACTS. How should we pray? We really get this from the Lord's prayer. Jesus wasn't telling us to quote, verbatim, the Lord's prayer, but here's some things to keep in mind

when you go to prayer every day. **Adoration** – Praise God for who he is. He’s holy, he’s creator, he’s amazing, he’s sovereign. **Confess** – Confess our sins. Why? What is so important about confessing, Adam; why are you harping on this sacred echo of confession? So, we confess our sin and then we’re **Thankful**. Then we go to **Supplication**. Here are some things I do have requests for, God, but let me go though these other things first.

When Aiden and I tuck in at night, we go through this together. We talk about confession. “God, sorry I was bitter towards Anders, but he bit me.” No, Aiden, we’re not justifying why we retaliated; we’re just confessing our sin tonight. We’ll deal with Anders’ biting later, but right now, we’re just dealing with your confession because it brings intimacy back to God.

What happens so many times is – and I see it in my own life and the lives of friends that I’m with – as we complain about God being silent in our lives... We complain that God is silent and we can’t hear his word, but we must not complain about God’s absence in our lives when our Bibles remain closed and our sin unconfessed. So, there is a barrier we build when our sin is unconfessed and our Bibles remain closed. God’s voice, his theopneustos (2 Timothy 3:16) is living and active (Hebrews 4:12) and he can speak to us.

There is this crazy verse in Isaiah 59 that talks about this. This is what Isaiah 59: 2 says: ***But your inequities...*** Your bitterness, your hatred towards a different political party, your sexual immorality, your pride whatever, right? ...***have built barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*** Literally what we do in our sin is we build this wall between us and our Father. First that original wall of sin, so all our pride, bitterness... All that sin has separated us from God. All of us have sinned. Not one has not sinned. But even when we become a believer, even when we trust Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior, and now we get to come over here and have intimacy with God again and his Word, we’re still believers. And as believers, he didn’t say we would be without sin; we’d still sin. So, when we walk in our sin, we’re building a barrier.

As Jesus was on the cross, he cried out in Aramaic, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” Which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Theologians believe that in that moment, Christ separated himself from the Father for the first time because God (Revelation 4:8) is holy, holy, holy, and Jesus had to take on the sin. God had to separate himself because he can have nothing to do with sin. So, Jesus separates himself from God in that moment to take on our sin.

So, now our sin still separates us from God, but here’s the great news. Even as believers and not experiencing the intimacy with God... You feel like God is distant from your life, but you believe in Jesus. If you feel like you can’t hear God’s voice, I always ask people this. Is there a sin in your life that you’re leaving unconfessed? Is there something in your life that is creating that barrier? For me, it always takes going to Psalm 139: 23-24 where it says, ***Search me O Lord and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in your way everlasting.***

Here's the beautiful thing. Watch this in Ephesians 2: 14-16. ***For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of the***

commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

So, if any of us walked in here today and said, "I don't have any sin to confess." I have a pretty good idea what the sin is, if you want me to tell you. I'll polish your halo in a moment, but I'm pretty sure it's the original sin that got Satan kicked out of heaven. It's called pride.

It's so important, regardless of where we are at in our spiritual... It's so important for me, Adam Donyes, to get in the habit of daily confessing my sin. Why? When I do that, I allow Jesus to demolish this wall and bring me back into intimacy with Christ. And I get to hear his voice and I get to experience intimacy because that barrier that I've built from unconfessed sin in my life... I don't hold to the tradition that you need to go confess to a priest. We have a high priest who is Jesus and we get to confess to him.

Now if someone else has been wronged by you, Matthew 18 would tell us we do need to go confess to our brother or sister in Christ that we wronged. That's our responsibility. And when we do that, when we do what scripture calls us to do and we walk in obedience to confession our brokenness and our sin, we walk into intimacy with Christ. I know we don't love hearing the word *sin* all the time, but the reality is that when we recognize our sin, we exalt Jesus. That's why he came; to seek and save the lost, the broken sinners like me. And when we recognize our sin, we magnify him. Amen?

Father God, we thank you so much for this church, for its leadership, for its families. God, thank you for those trusted voices in our life, as Ted alluded to. God, I pray we listen to those trusted voices. I pray we would lean more into people that tell us what we need to hear and run less to people that tell us what we want to hear. God, I pray for those sharpening voices. I pray we would receive them with humility.

I pray, Lord, that if there is anything in my heart, or in any of the hearts of this room, that we don't see or recognize, would your Holy Spirit bring to mind things we may need to confess to just be in a right standing with you. We know we're forgiven, Lord. We know your son died on the cross for us, but God, search our hearts and test us and know our anxious thoughts. Bless them throughout the week. May we be a light to a dark world this week through the Woodland Hills family.

It's in the mighty and matchless name of Jesus we pray, and all God's people said... Amen.