

Do any of you rehearse conversations in your mind before having them? Perhaps you lie in bed the night before a meeting and practice what you are going to say about an item on the agenda. Maybe you anticipate having to make a difficult phone call that could lead to an emotional conversation and so you practice what you want to say so you don't lose your focus in the midst of your amplified feelings. Conceivably you're practicing how to de-escalate and redirect potentially divisive conversations that could happen at a family dinner during the holidays.

Before having such conversations, I often jot down key phrases I want to use, sometimes going so far as to have bulleted "talking points" written out. I do this because I know myself . . . in the heat of the moment I tend to forget what I wanted to say, I grow emotional and cry, or, worse yet, I become defensive. And so it is that I outline the conversation and practice before it takes place. Indeed, sometimes, by the time all is said and done, I have rehearsed a conversation so many times in my mind that I grow confused as to whether or not I've actually had the conversation or just practiced having the conversation.

While organizing one's thoughts on a subject is a helpful discipline, preparing a defense, anticipating rancor, and gearing up for a fight before a word of an actual conversation has taken place is likely not a wise approach. Doing so sets up an antagonistic relationship and immediately puts people in a defensive position. Adopting a defensive position is something for tight ends, point guards, drivers, and people walking through dark alleys at night. Assuming a defensive position in a relationship meant to be productive and mutually-edifying, the kinds of relationships intended between spouses, family members, co-workers, and church families—is counter-productive and potentially harmful.

In an article called "Defensiveness Is Killing Your Relationships—How to Recognize It and What to Do About It"¹ the author writes, "People react defensively because they anticipate or perceive a threat in their environment, not usually because they're just wanting to be difficult. Unfortunately, defensive behavior creates a reciprocal cycle . . . For many people, their behavioral patterns stem from emotional, mental, or personality issues/tendencies developed over the course of their lifetimes (feelings of abandonment, inferiority, low self-esteem, narcissism, etc.)"²

When I read this portion of the article last week, my neck got hot and my face turned red with an embarrassment born of recognition. It reminded me of a moment in which I had acted ridiculously and defensively earlier in the week. During breakfast Jesse was spreading peanut butter on his toast. I commented that I didn't like the peanut butter we had gotten at Trader Joe's and I wanted to go back to buying peanut butter at Costco. Jesse replied, "Yes, this stuff doesn't have as much sugar." Well—by the intensity of my feelings of defensiveness his

¹ <https://leadingwithtrust.com/2014/06/29/your-defensiveness-is-killing-your-relationships/>

comment about peanut butter ingredients generated, you'd think he had said, "Yes, Honey. Your bum does look big in those pants and your hair cut is an embarrassment to the entire family." But that is not what he said and yet I immediately went into defensive mode and retorted to his comment about the sugar content of peanut butter with, "Well, I don't put honey on my toast with the peanut butter like you do because I don't even like honey!" and stormed out of the kitchen. And if my impassioned retort is leaving you wondering, I'm guessing it did the same for Jesse, too but I didn't stick around long enough to find out.

So where did that defensive response come from? Negative body image. I attribute weight issues I had earlier in life to having a crazy sweet tooth that I find difficult to curb. I feel like if I were a better person, if I had more self-control, if I were as disciplined as other people, if I prayed more about resisting the temptation of sugar, I wouldn't like sugar so much and I wouldn't eat so much of it. These are issues with which I have struggled for most of my life. Jesse's innocent comment struck my "already always listening place," that spot within my spirit that is pumped and primed to take issue and prepare to rumble in an effort to protect myself from the shame of being overweight in a society that idolizes thinness. My response had nothing to do with what was going on in the present, nothing to do with peanut butter-be it from Trader Joe's or Costco. Rather, my defensive response was based on what had happened in the past, those experiences and hurts that create the emotional and spiritual baggage we have a tendency to drag along with us from our past into our present and future.

And so it is that I immediately went on the defensive when sugar was mentioned because, again as the article states, "behavioral patterns stem from emotional, mental, or personality issues/tendencies developed over the course of a lifetime . . . feelings of low self-esteem, etc." My insecurity was the source of my defensive outburst towards my husband. He meant no harm and was simply making an observation about the ingredients in peanut butter. And yet, because of my own hang-ups, I heard in his comment WAY more than he was saying. Thankfully, one of the wisest things I've ever done is marry Jesse Carden who, along with having numerous other fabulous qualities, is one of the least defensive and most mature children of God currently walking around on the face of the earth.

But what if he wasn't? What if he had gotten defensive, too? What if he would have said something to escalate the situation, something like, "Why are you always so sensitive about stupid things"? Because this is the issue with defensive behavior. One defensive comment leads to another, the situation escalates, painful things are said, feelings get hurt, and trust is damaged. Going on the defense is counter-productive to the end goal of personal growth and maintaining healthy relationships. According to psychologist Shawn Burn "Our relationships are often better and our performance higher when we resist our defensiveness . . ."³ Thankfully I've had a chance to apologize to Jesse for the Peanut Butter Incident of November 2019 and we've had a good laugh and we will buy sugar-laden peanut butter tomorrow at Costco for me

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/presence-mind/201902/defensiveness-enemy-growth-and-good-relationships>

to enjoy on my breakfast toast. But, there's really nothing funny about defensive behavior and the damage it can do to our most cherished relationships.

Now I'm pretty certain that when Jesus said, "So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance . . ." in the passage Scott just read for us, he was not talking about the kind of defensiveness in interpersonal relationships that I exhibited in our kitchen last week. Rather, Jesus is offering words of warning and encouragement to his followers, folks he knows are going to face terrible suffering because they believe in him and people who believed in him were the targets of persecution by corrupt religious and government officials. Jesus knows that some of his followers are going to be taken to trial and called upon to defend themselves. He assures them that, when the time comes, he will provide them with "words and wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." He goes on to show us what such "words and wisdom" look like when he is tried before the Sanhedrin—a court of religious officials. This story comes from Mark's gospel and takes place after Jesus has been arrested.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. ⁵⁶ Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.

⁵⁷ Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ⁵⁸ "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'" ⁵⁹ Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶¹ But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

⁶² "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." —Mark 14:66-62

And that was it. Not a word more. Though he knew he was facing death, his answer was simple and he offered no defense. He didn't launch into his credentials, offering stories of miracles he had performed as evidence of his messiahship. He didn't lay out his genealogy—tracing his roots back to King David in an attempt to convince the court that he was who he said he was—though he certainly could have. But he didn't. Jesus doesn't justify, simplify, amplify, or pacify. He simply answers the question and refuses to fall prey to the bullying and cajoling of his critics. He knows who he is and whose he is and with that kind of knowledge, there is no need for him to get defensive.

And, could it be the same for us? As followers of Christ, people who claim the gifts of forgiveness and mercy, salvation and redemption, could it be that that's enough and we need not be defensive? Is the knowledge that, in Christ we are enough and in Christ, we are not too

much enough and we need not be defensive? Is the knowledge of who we are and more importantly whose we are enough and we need not be defensive? Yes! I assure you it is enough—we are children of the Lord God Almighty, forgiven, redeemed, and made new and we need not be defensive. As such, we can leave our suitcases full of regrets, shames, and fears from the past unclaimed on the baggage carousel and walk into the world confident that, should the time come when we are put on trial and asked to defend ourselves for the things we do because we follow Christ, we will be given “the words and wisdom that none of our opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”

Indeed, we do not need to be defensive. We do not need to be afraid. We do not need to feel threatened because with God as our defender, everything really is going to be okay—maybe not right now, but certainly one day, when God’s kingdom comes, on earth as it is in heaven. And for right now, we can let our defenses down knowing that, no matter what happens, God provides us the words and wisdom we need for the living of our days. And that, my friends, IS enough.