

Road to Relapse -- Rationalizing

Rationalizing is a thought process through which we provide a reasonable but untrue reason for consequences resulting from our actions. It is a way of avoiding responsibility.

People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy.

Proverbs 28:13

Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with. James 5:16 (The Message)

Rationalizing results from an internal belief that we are the victims of circumstances beyond our control. Due either to the actions or inactions of others, we give ourselves permission to act in inappropriate ways or to avoid taking steps that are appropriate. We provide explanations of our situations so we can avoid having to look at our own actions. Sometimes we've been rationalizing for so long that it is more an unconscious process than a deliberate deception.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24)

Rationalizing has been with us for as long as sin has. Eve knew that God had made the fruit from that tree off-limits, but when she saw that ***“the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it”*** (Gen. 3:6). She looked at the circumstances and mentally overruled God's commandment.

Rationalizing often comes into play when we choose not to obey God's prompting as well as when we disobey His commands. Sins of omission are just as serious as sins of commission, since ***“anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins”*** (James 4:17).

Why do we make excuses for our bad behaviour and try to rationalize our guilt away? Often it's as simple wanting what the bad behaviour can give us. It might also be avoidance of the inconvenience that owning up to something and taking responsibility for it brings. We're afraid of the shame, the pain, the embarrassment, or the disappointment that results from our poor choices. If we can just excuse away what we did or blame someone else then it's "off our shoulders."

We want what sin can give us. We know in our hearts that what we want to do is wrong but the promised results of sin are so enticing, we search for a way to get them without

letting go of our beliefs." We tell a lie because we are afraid that if we tell the truth someone will be hurt or some difficult consequence will come to us or something we think we need will not be given to us. We tell ourselves, "I'm just doing what I HAVE to do." We know gossip is wrong, but we so enjoy telling that juicy story because we are ticked off with that person. Then we choose to rationalize "I'm not gossiping. I'm just telling what happened." We shoplift or even steal something from a friend and tell ourselves that they will never miss it. If it's a store we rationalize that they have a budget to cover losses through theft so no one really gets hurt.

Taking responsibility and refusing to excuse or rationalize can seem difficult and costly. That's often why we engage in rationalizing in the first place. To be honest and up front might cost us time. It might mean we have to humble ourselves to admit our wrong. It might feel unpleasant (although that usually only lasts for a moment). The things God asks us to do often threaten our comfort zones. At other times, obeying God's promptings is just inconvenient. So we search for excuses--ways to keep up our spiritual self-image while avoiding right behaviours and responsibility taking.

When God tells us to do something and we don't do it, it's disobedience. When God tells us not to do something and we do it, we disobey. For all sin there is forgiveness--instant, total, and completely undeserved. But rationalization is nothing to toy with. Making excuses for sin gives it a foothold in our lives. And sin hurts. It hurts the people we sin against and damages our relationship with God. If we continue to rationalize our disobedience, our hearts will harden. The Holy Spirit's voice in our lives will grow increasingly faint every time we block it out.

God, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the Lord" and you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. (Psalm 32:5)

People of integrity call a sin a sin. They don't blame their actions on others or on circumstances. When they sin, they admit what they did was wrong, confess, and repent. When God asks them to do something, it becomes priority one. We need to continually hold our lives before God, asking Him to bring to mind any commands we've ignored and any sins we're excusing. Then our consciences--and our lives--can be clean and pure.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What keeps me from facing my actions without excuses?
2. What tools or strategies help a person recognize and move beyond rationalizing?