

Mentoring the Hurting (Part II)

BY DAVID POSEY

We had a great discussion on Wednesday night, led by Will Childress, on helping those who are in some kind of pain. We looked briefly at Job's plight and his friends' "mentoring" efforts, that were largely an utter failure. We also discussed Elijah's feeling of aloneness, recorded in I Kings 19. God mentored him out of his doldrums, with a quiet voice of encouragement.

When asked "who are the people who are hurting," we got several, predictable, answers: people with health issues; death; relationship issues; loneliness and issues; financial problems; life changes — marriage and children can bring unique, brand new challenges to a family.

All of the things mentioned, initially, are things that happen to all people, whether they have a relationship with God or not. Jesus said, "the rain falls on the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). But we also talked about the pain that we inflict on ourselves, and sometimes others, through sin.

The point of this discussion was to discuss the importance of finding a mentor to help you through the difficulty, whatever it might be. Some of the comments had more to do with how the church — the collective body — can help, but the question of the quarter is "how can I be a mentor to people who are hurting?"

Remember that a mentor is someone you trust who has life experience and is willing to help you navigate your way through this world, without becoming "of the world" (John 17:14-16). It's a two-way street: both mentor and mentee (OK, no more "manatee" jokes, OK?) must be humble. The mentor is not a superhero who has conquered all his sins and now is ready to save the day. If he thinks like that, he's no mentor; he's a self-righteous fool.

A mentor is one who knows that he doesn't know everything and is still struggling, like the rest of us, to get through this world in one piece. He or she has some "scars" and those scars may save you some wear and tear, if you listen. The mentor must be willing to share some things, although avoiding the "prayer-partner-confess-all" mentality adopted by the old Boston Movement. That "movement" turned into a cult. I believe the "confess your sins to one another" command in James 5:16 is more general than specific but there are times to open up, especially if you are trying to help someone through a specific difficulty. In any case, to be an effective mentor, you must be willing to risk being "vulnerable." The Bible word is "weak" as in "when I am weak then I am strong" (II Cor. 12:10).

When we are mentoring the hurting, it is important to identify whether the pain is from a nonspiritual source or from something self-inflicted — i.e., sin. If it's the latter, your aim is to help them repent and then accept God's grace.

We need this reminder because some feel only someone who has committed a similar sin can help us deal with our sin. If that's true, then Jesus cannot mentor anyone since he never once succumbed to temptation. But he *can* help us because, ...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. *Hebrews 4:15*

Having said that, if we are ashamed of our sin — as we should be — we will find it easier to disclose our sin to someone who has committed that sin, but repented and overcome it, and is equally ashamed. The emphasis is on being *ashamed*. I have heard some talk about past sins and addictions as if they are bragging about it; as if succumbing to temptation gives them some kind of credibility or “gravitas.” In some of those cases, I hear the word “ashamed” but I don't see any evidence of it. In fact, it's just the opposite; they all but say out loud, “look how cool I am because I sinned this way but conquered it.” You can believe that there's another huge sin lurking behind that attitude.

For those people, conquered sin becomes their calling card. Yet, I notice that Peter didn't lead with his denial of Christ when he preached on the Day of Pentecost. In fact, I don't remember Peter ever mentioning his denial again. If our conquered sin becomes our primary claim to fame, then we have a problem, not the least of which is that we are drawing attention to ourselves, not to Christ. Will said on Wednesday, more than once, that the power is not in us but in God and he's right.

I think that's at least one reason why Will warned us not to tell someone who is hurting to “get over it.” There are times when we need to “get over it” and most parents have used that phrase several times in their kids' lives. And, certainly, when it comes to bearing grudges or bathing in pity, we probably just need to get over it and move on.

But, gritting our teeth and clinching our fist doesn't usually cure us, whether we are fighting a purely human battle or dealing with sin. It's more about letting go than gripping harder. In the case of our human battles, such as dealing with illness, we have to prayerfully allow the problem to run its course, while doing all we can to fix the problem. A mentor helps, in that case, just by being there, listening and giving some sound advice when asked.

When we're dealing with habitual sin, it's more complicated. Telling someone to “get over it” is not very helpful, although, Jesus tells us just to do whatever it takes to stop sinning:

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell *Mark 9:47*

One might argue that Jesus is telling us to “just quit it.” If the sin is a nagging one, that may be easier said than done so a mentor might be able to help you with the “amputation” process. When we look at how God mentors people, we should realize that there is a lot of discipline involved. We talked about Job on Wednesday night and should note that Job was being tested, and therefore, mentored, by God from the very

beginning. He allowed Satan to do his dirty work and in the process Job learned a lot about God and himself.

Remember, at the end of it all, God gave him an uncomfortable lecture that begins like this,

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

Job 42:1-4

Job's experience was the mentoring trial for the ages; his friends tried to help, and did for awhile, when they just sat with him in stunned silence for a week. But they failed to observe the golden rule of speech: "do not speak if it doesn't improve on silence." Once they opened their mouths they exposed a woeful, if common, theology: that problems in life are a result of sin (see John 9). Job knew he was not perfect, but he also knew he had integrity and that his friend's suppositions had no basis.

But even Job's approach was not acceptable to God. The point is that mentoring is not always "encouragement" in the sense that we think about it. A true mentor will call you out on your sins and correct you if you are wrong. As Tyler Brown commented in class, he can't take your burden away; he can only help you bear it. But that might require some brutally honest advice.

One final point: we can't help you bear your burden — which is every Christian's responsibility (Gal. 6:1ff.) — if we don't know about it. There was a lot of talk about "vulnerability" on Wednesday night, but that starts with the person who needs help. None of us can read minds (aren't you glad?!). Find a trusted "mentor" and tell him or her your problems and let them help you and pray for you. That's what "community" is all about.