

*Luke 17:1-4; 2 Cor. 7:9-13a Sermons\Luke.17L

Wounded Victims Released

[READING Luke 17:1-4]

¹ Jesus said to His disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!” ² It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³ Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴ And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

Jesus said to His disciples, “**Occasions for stumbling are bound to come.**” *Whoa!* I have to stop right there. That’s interesting. Because I’ve had occasion to stumble. Another translation says it this way: “**There will always be temptations to sin...**” And I’ve experienced temptations. Do you know what I mean? I’ve not always been able to avoid temptation; I’ve “stumbled” into *sin*. And I know friends who have stumbled, too.

But what if you’re the one doing the tempting? What if you’re the problem?

Well, bad news: “Woe to those who do the tempting.”

That doesn’t sound too promising! “It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” That’s a pretty desperate situation!

But then the Lord says, **Be on your guard!** If another disciple sins ...be on guard! That sounds like a call to be a lifeguard! We can rescue those who have fallen! **If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender.** Another term: “Rebuke!” That sounds pretty harsh. What does that mean? Whack him in the head with a rock? No! Other translations say, “correct him,” or “warn them.” **If you see your friend doing wrong, correct them.** (MSG)

Now that’s really good news! Because the one who stumbles into sin – is not a lost cause! I can be *corrected*, and we can *repent!* And you see, that’s the way we’re to lead with our correction: so our friend is guided to *repentance*. [We’re going to get to the meaning of “repentance.”]

But the problem is there are many people who are drowning – and don’t even know it. Today we’re not going to talk about the big ugly, hairy sins and temptations! You may have stumbled with simple sin in your life – subtle sins – and you’re not even *aware!*

Today we’re talking to *victims*. Victims of crime. Victims of abuse. Victims of neglect and grief.

And you say, these aren’t the ones who have sinned; they’ve been sinned *against!* “Victims aren’t the perpetrators of evil. Their pain isn’t their fault. They were *innocent!*”

And, yes, I agree. They really were innocent. They didn’t deserve the abuse they caught.

But victims can be forever altered or shaped by that tragedy – that memory – so that we are something *less* than what God intends us to be!

Mary was 26-years old and struggling with feelings of depression. She had grown up feeling distant from both her father, who was a workaholic, and her mother who had to take care of a large family. (I want you to hear what Mary was experiencing. She had no real relationship with her parents. She had been starving for affection, for tenderness, or intimacy with her family.)

Mary was especially haunted by a defining moment, an unforgettable event when she turned 13 – and neither of her parents remembered her birthday. Her father came home late that

night and she was already in bed. But she got up to remind him that it was her birthday, and she began to cry. Her father got upset, scolding her instead of apologizing for forgetting her birthday.

Mary was a “victim.” Mary didn’t deserve to be neglected. But because her genuine need to feel loved was constantly trampled, Mary came up with a way to live where she wouldn’t be hurt by “needing” validation again. You can understand this. Subconsciously, as a way to protect her feelings or emotions Mary would avoid “needing” anybody in any future relationship. She would no longer depend on others for “kindness.” That didn’t mean she wouldn’t date, fall in love, and marry!

But imagine what that looks like: a person who is unable to enter into intimacy; someone who feels very awkward with intimate relationships – someone who has constructed a barrier with their spouse, with children, neighbors or friends. In order not to be hurt again, Mary would never be *powerless*; she’d stay in control! She’d be in control of her feelings, her needs, and keep all these close to her vest, like a poker player, and not be hung out to be hurt again.

This pattern of relating, of maintaining a strict composure and hiding the emotions is so typical for “victims,” like the woman who was sexually abused; or the man who was mocked and teased by school athlete; the girl who was neglected in her home or the boy who was humiliated for “crying” at the wrong time; the high school student whose physical appearance was belittled, or fondled; the girl whose date forced her into sex; the child who wore the label “fat” or “ugly” throughout elementary school; the faithful spouse whose partner abandoned them; the family member who was forced to conform or the child who was manipulated and controlled.

None of these can let loose to *dance* with God!

You won’t let yourself to be that free. You won’t let yourself relax. You’re constantly on guard, protecting yourself.

You may choose to experience relationships in a shallow, superficial way; and that’s the way you’ll be known. The one who “protects” their spirit and emotions becomes hard-hearted ...and hurts other people – unaware. And here’s the KEY: masking any signs of weakness, you may fail to accept faults or flaws in others. And you may come across as arrogant, judging others for what appears as weaknesses in them.

Now, keep in mind, I’m talking about *victims*.

But in order to protect themselves, some victims have allowed no real intimacy, no warmth, no compassion in their relationships – they’ve kept others distant, and are unable to engage others with feeling or emotion, even deflecting God’s Spirit.

We can create a tragic world in which to live.

The Bible describes these people as Christian believers – but they are people who are influenced by their own “corrupt nature,” or by their tragic past:

[READING 1 Corinthians 3:1-3]

¹ Brothers and sisters, I couldn’t talk to you as spiritual people but as people still influenced by your corrupt nature. You were infants in your faith in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink. I didn’t give you solid food because you weren’t ready for it. Even now you aren’t ready for it ³ because you’re still influenced by your corrupt nature. When you are jealous and quarrel among yourselves, aren’t you influenced by your corrupt nature and living by human standards?

Some of you know this inner conflict, this love-less world.

And there’s the flaw; the sin. It’s one thing for a child to find a way to protect or to numb their self from the travesty of abuse. But when, as an adult, you allow these coping

strategies to continue in a way that keeps you from entering into relationship with those you are called to love, you're no longer "coping" in healthy ways. Are you not violating God's highest command to love others and to love yourself? And the worldly influence – corrupts the hope and desire God has for you. *Listen:* When you are influenced by the corrupt nature, it can pollute the spirit and the mind like an untreated infection. This may be why Jesus instructs us to be on guard, to watch over each other, and care for one another! Because unhealthy coping strategies may drain the joy from your soul. In fact, Christians who are forever "troubled" by detached relationships may be stifled by unhealthy emotional memories.

Victims who protect themselves by stiffening to a "touch," or detaching from others, may *sin* by refusing God the right to use you as His instrument of love and grace in a world filled with hurt.

But don't let the label of "sinner" throw you – because there is a cure; a remedy for our sin. That's the *good news!* God throws a life preserver to those who are drowning. It is called "repentance," and it is the life line of grace from a loving God who wants to rescue and heal you of those devilish influences.

Often, we think of repentance as a changing of our mind, a changing of our will, choosing to walk in a new direction. And it is all that.

But repentance has to touch us deeper, too. The kind of repentance that simply aims to "do right" is barely transforming; simply trying to "do better" is a feeble response.

Repentance for the battered, weary victim is recognizing that the protective strategies to avoid being hurt have not brought you the real beauty and glamour God has created for you! We're talking about the inner beauty – the inner life of peace and calm! Through repentance, you deeply acknowledge the supreme call to *love* – acknowledging, too, how ineffectively you allow yourself to love.

Listen to this real life story. Some of you have heard this before: Julie was working the late shift at a hotel just south of Montgomery, Alabama. Her part-time employment helped pay her college bills as she finished school. She was a devout Christian. But her belief was tested the night two men held a gun to her head and forced her into their truck. She was robbed, repeatedly raped, and left handcuffed to a tree. It was 2:00 in the morning before she was rescued.

The nightmare nearly destroyed her. She couldn't function, the hotel fired her, and she dropped out of school. In her words, she was "shattered, lost, and bewildered."

But listen to Julie's own words: "After this experience I spent a great deal of time thinking about God... I searched and I prayed for understanding. I longed to be healed... My spirit and faith were sorely tested; my spiritual journey in the months that followed was *painful* ...but also wonderful."

"God allowed me to profit from an awful and devastating event. So many good things are in my life now. I have wonderful friends – most of whom I would never have met or known were it not for this experience. I have a job that allows me to work with and serve crime victims. I have a deeper relationship with God. I am spiritually wiser and more mature. I have been blessed beyond what I can tell in these pages..."

Julie now has a ministry speaking to groups about God's mercy and healing. What satan meant for evil Jesus used for good. He redeemed and transformed her experience. What was awful is still awful – but now the memory of it – and the pain – doesn't devastate the young lady.

Repentance is making a decision to live in a whole new way! Julie let Jesus "redeem" her personal nightmare – as she found inner healing and new purpose for her life: "Guarding" others so that new friends would find relief!

You see, damage from the past does not justify shallow, unloving relationships in the present.

Repentance begins with dissatisfaction with the way we relate with others. When we see that our efforts to make life work have taken us to the dumps instead, it's time to turn to Jesus, for He can heal your wounded soul!

Biblical repentance always leads us in a new direction; dancing to the rhythm of new song! Biblical repentance leads us to invest more of our "self" to care for others and to care for God! Because, you see, the point of living is giving, not getting.

One word of caution. Some people on the way to repentance stop off at penance, instead. Let me explain the difference.

- True repentance admits a helplessness, a helplessness to become something new or different alone. We're turning to God.
- Penance presumes you have the ability to make amends on your own.
- Repentance is a hungering for grace. We're turning to God.
- Penance is an arrogant attempt at self control.
- Penance says that my sin isn't that awful; all I have to do is figure a way to change.
- Repentance is a plea for mercy, a call to God for help.

INVITATION: Isn't God speaking to some of you who have long fallen into relationship patterns that have smothered a genuine love or intimate friendships? You have held on to unhealthy patterns of relating for too long; mostly unaware! But God is longing for you to walk with Him into a full, complete repentance.

Today will only be the first step of your journey. There will need to be more. But the first step is the most difficult – acknowledging destructive patterns of self-protection. The journey with God will absolutely set you free to dance! To live and love so freely, the world around you will seem to ignite with all the power and energy of God's love; it can be nothing but precious and pleasing and good!

Some of you live with people who have been broken by the past. And perhaps for the first time – you understand the need for kindness, grace, patience and a love that endures – for their sake! Thank-you for loving so deeply and faithfully. Pray for your partner or for your friend.

SONG: "*Spirit of the Living God*" can be a powerful prayer ...as we yield control of our lives into the kindness of God's influence.

PRAYER: Pray through the following prayer and listen to how God is leading you into healing:

O God, Giver of Life, Bearer of Pain, Maker of Love,
 You are able to accept in us
 what we cannot even acknowledge;
 You are able to name in us
 what we cannot bear to speak of;
 You are able to hold in Your memory
 what we have tried to forget;
 You are able to hold out to us
 the glory that we cannot conceive of.

Reconcile us through Your cross

to all that we have rejected in our selves,
that we may find no part of Your creation
to be alien or strange to us,
and that we ourselves may be made whole.
Through Jesus Christ, our Love and our Friend. Amen