

HURTING PARENTS, II

Scripture Reading: 1 John 4:7-12, NIV

David is convinced that Saul wants to kill him. But Jonathan, Saul's son and David's best friend, does not believe his father wants to harm David.

They decide to put the matter to a test. David decides he will not attend a dinner given by Saul. If the king readily accepts Jonathan's explanation that David has gone to Bethlehem to participate in an important family gathering, then it will be clear that Saul means him no harm. On the other hand, if Saul get angry because David is absent, that will indicate that he does indeed want David destroyed.

Jonathan agrees to participate in David's test because he is so sure that Saul would never do anything sinister to David, or if he were planning to, would have confided his intentions to Jonathan. The outcome of this plot is detailed in 1 Samuel 20:24-33:

So David hid in the field, and when the New Moon festival came, the king sat down to eat. He sat in his customary place by the wall. Jonathan sat opposite him, and Abner sat next to Saul, but David's place was empty. Saul said nothing that day, for he thought, "Something must have happened to David to make him ceremonially unclean—surely he is unclean." But the next day, the second day of the month, David's place was empty again. Then Saul said to his son Jonathan, "Why hasn't the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?" Jonathan answered, "David earnestly asked me for permission to go to Bethlehem. He said, 'Let me go, because our family is observing a sacrifice in the town and my brother has ordered me to be there. If I have found favor in your eyes, let me go away to see my brothers.' That is why he has not come to the king's table." Saul's anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you? As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he must die!" "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" Jonathan asked his father. But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew that his father intended to kill David. Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger; that second day of the month he did not eat, because he was grieved at his father's shameful treatment of David.

Can you imagine a father getting so angry at his son at dinner time that he tries to kill him? Can you imagine a son responding with equal rage? You certainly can. It happens all the time.

Physical violence does happen even in the best of homes when people are afraid and frustrated over their children. Fathers swing before they know what is happening to them; children scream and react with terror at parents who have suddenly become wild-eyed and uncontrollable.

You may suspect your child is out drinking when you warned him or her not to. You may be furious because he promised to be home by midnight and it's 2:30 in the morning and he, hasn't even been courteous enough to call. He may have told you he was going to a friend's house and later on you learn that he lied. You may find money missing from your purse and realize that all the evidence points to

HURTING PARENTS, II

your own child as the thief.

As time passes the strain becomes almost unbearable for everybody. Nerves are frayed. Tension comes in not just between child and parents but between husband and wife—the family is literally coming apart at the seams.

Most of us who are parents are afraid. We see the dangers our children do not see. We understand too well that poor decisions and undisciplined habits have a way of trapping us when we are young, forcing us to live our whole lives in ways we will regret.

We are also a little panicky because our children live in a world we never knew: drugs in high school, coed dormitories, sexual permissiveness, readily available contraceptives. They live in a world we didn't know and we feel helpless to deal with their temptations. The whole thing weighs heavily on our hearts and when our fears find no release, we begin to get angry.

I have flown over Mt. St. Helens twice in the last year—the morning it exploded and again last weekend. I learned that a few days before the explosion it was obvious to geologists that the pressure was building because there was a 500-foot bulge on the north side of the mountain. It is speculated that a minor earthquake took place and put a tiny hole in the side of the mountain. It was just like pricking a hole in a balloon—the whole thing went in a horrendous explosion.

That's the way some of us are who are parents. We sit on our fears and our frustrations and the pressure builds and builds. All of a sudden, over some insignificant thing, everything breaks loose.

Because we are Christians we tell ourselves that we cannot be getting angry because that is unchristian, so we never can be honest enough about our feelings to get them out in the open and deal with them. Fears and frustrations that are not talked through do become volatile.

We become further frustrated because nothing we do seems to work. We have tried to live model lives and be good examples, or perhaps we haven't tried. In either case, when our children forsake our faith and live lives of self-indulgence and lust, we are enraged. Then we feel guilty.

It must be our fault. What have we done wrong? we ask ourselves. We torture our consciences. We weep. We pray. We despair. We find no relief. We want immediate results, so we threaten and punish. But our anger doesn't work! Changes do not come overnight. It is too easy for parents to assume all of the guilt when children have problems. Children have responsibilities too. When I talk to young people and they tell me they know why they behave the way they do, they are already responsible for the way they behave.

I well remember a statement made by one of my seminary professors in a course on righteousness by faith. We were talking about forgiveness and he said: "If someone cannot be healed by love, that person is incurable."

I have never forgotten that phrase, for it sums up the only viable approach parents have to children who are hurting them. It goes by many names: acceptance, unconditional love, forgiveness, but it all amounts to the same thing,

It means that parents learn to restrain their bitterness, separate the child's behavior from the child's personhood, seek to maintain warm, loving relationships even while they despise what their child is doing; accept their child even though their child responds repeatedly with rejection. I am talking about a nonhuman love and acceptance in a truly inhuman suffering.

Even though it appears that your children have totally rejected you, it almost never is the case. It is a fact that we all have an insatiable need for acceptance. "From infancy, children crave assurance of their worth. As much as they need love, they need to feel worthy of love." (Margie M. Lewis, *The Hurting Parent*, Zondervan, p. 59)

Can we accept our children just the way they are? Sins and all? If you can't you are saying that your children are not worthy of love which is a far more cruel message to send them than the fact they are not being loved. Many who cannot accept confuse acceptance with approval. On this view acceptance is a negative, passive response. Acceptance and love are never passive responses. What is needed is a view of acceptance as an aggressive force—so aggressive that our disappointment over our children does not hinder it. Aggressive acceptance acts out feelings of love and affirmation. It is primarily concerned about building relationships, not condemning behavior. It softens, soothes and melts the conflict. It is the only way God ultimately works with his rebellious children and it is the only helpful way we can work with our children.

There is a theological and psychological insight behind this approach. Carl Rogers refers to it in his book *On Becoming a Person*:

If I accept the other person as something fixed, already diagnosed and classified, already shaped by his past, then I am doing my part to confirm this limited hypothesis. If I accept him as a process of becoming, then I am doing what I can to confirm or make real his potentialities. (Quoted in Lewis, p. 64)

In other words if I respond with rejection to another person I am telling that person there is no hope for him or her ever to change, to realize his or her potentialities. It says "I have given up on you."

Acceptance, however, loudly and enthusiastically declares: You are still worth a great deal, you are still full of promise, you are still important and have a bright future before you. But you may have to choose to accept before your feelings do any accepting. God asks no more than that and he will bless you as you step out in faith.

The unconditional love of God to us—love that helps hurting parents find the better way to their children—is illustrated in the story of the Farrone family.

The Labor Day picnic was over. The family had had a good day but as always their thoughts turned toward their son Tony. Later the phone rang and the operator announced a collect call from Tony Farrone. "Will you accept the charges?" In an instant that so-familiar voice came on the line—the one they longed to hear. "Hi, Mom." A pause. "I'm so sick, Mom, and so hungry. I'm really hurting. Tell me what to do." Then a strong, business-like voice boomed into her ear, "Mam, your son came dragging into my lobby here a few minutes ago and begged me to let him use our phone to call you. He is in bad shape and he is here at the Holiday Inn." The man named a city 150 miles from the Farrone home.

HURTING PARENTS, II

Carol, the mother, asked for a favor: "Please put him up in a room for the night. We'll be there first thing in the morning to pick him up and pay you for all your trouble." Joe Farrone, the father, was on the extension phone and immediately said: "Sir, we will leave immediately to come and get him. He needs us now. Please keep him there for us."

Then minutes later the whole excited family, even the teenage girls, piled into the car. They knew without being told that Tony was on drugs again. But at least they now knew where he was. It was easier to know than live in uncertainty.

Three hours later they entered the lobby of the Holiday Inn and saw Tony stretched out on a couch. "We're here, son. We've come to take you home." Tony heard nothing his father said. He looked almost dead. His hair was matted and stuck to his face. Dirt was caked all over him. Ragged, sweat-soaked clothes covered his body. Holes were worn in both shoes.

The motel manager was paid and it was obvious that Tony would have to be carried out to the car. So the whole family lovingly took him in their arms and carried him gently out of the lobby and across the parking lot in the middle of the night. Strapped to the front seat, Tony slumped over unconscious. After driving only one block, the stench in the close quarters of the car became almost unbearable. The smell of perspiration and vomit were so strong they held their noses as they rode along with the windows open.

Joe said: "I remember thinking as I drove home, I've heard so many sermons about the prodigal son in a stinking pigpen. Now, here I am holding my nose and living out that very scene. But what really hit me was how thankful the prodigal's father must have felt. And then the thought: "My son, I love him because he is my son. He has come back home and that's all that matters now." (From Lewis, pp. 77-90)

Unconditional love—greater even than natural, parental love—the final weapon, the greatest resource hurting Christian parents can use. Don't stop giving it. We should give much more when the children are young, but as I heard Bob Schwindt say: You can't give too much touching, physical affection, even when we are adults.

When we are hurt we tend to curtail physical contact, but soft touches, gentle squeezes mean more than we will ever know. One of the earliest signs of conflict in the family is that physical contact is curtailed. We must not use love, however, to manipulate or to lay guilt trips. If we have the attitude, "In spite of the way you have treated me, look how much I have done for you," it won't work. That is a love that flaunts itself. It is not unconditional; it wants recognition, gratitude and conformity.

Unconditional acceptance is humble and hides itself. The power is in its hiddenness. It doesn't need the limelight to work; therefore, it doesn't create resentments and barriers.

"Humble love is free to work gently, inoffensively behind the scenes, unencumbered by the need to be noticed." (From Lewis, p. 83)

Be patient, hurting parents. Let your love work, even if it is only from a distance.

In his sermon, "The Waiting Father," Helmut Thielicke suggests that the most striking trait of the

Father was patience.

He waited. He didn't go chasing after his son to drag him home. He didn't try to convince the boy of his foolishness or make the boy feel guilty. He just waited, living the kind of life, offering the kind of love, providing the kind of home that would eventually draw his son back. (From Lewis, p. 138.)

When the boy decided to come home, it wasn't that he became guilty and disgusted with himself and home looked pretty good.

No, it's the other way around; it was because the father and the father's house loomed up before his soul that he became disgusted with himself...So it was not because that far country made him sick that he turned back home. It was rather that the consciousness of home disgusted him with the far country, actually made him realize what...lostness is. (Quoted in Lewis, p. 138.)

Hurting parents, the Bible is full of promises for you:

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18, NIV).

"Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their way, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil" (Psalm 37:7-8, NIV).

And finally,

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4: 6-8, NIV).

Let us begin today to claim these promises for ourselves and our children. Let God heal and work his love through you to bring them back.