

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Dealing With Strategies of Sin

by Dan Trygg

“...you were ransomed/redeemed out from the empty/futile/worthless habit-patterns (of life) {i.e., those habits you return to again and again} which were given across (to you) by your fathers/parents.” I Pet. 1:18b

“This I say and earnestly testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk about just like the unbelievers/nations walk about in the emptiness/futility/worthlessness of their understanding/perception/mind, being in the state of having been darkened in their understanding/reasoning, having been separated/alienated/cut off from the life/vitality of God because of the ignorance (the 'not-knowing-ness') existing in them on account of the ossification/petrification/unfeelingness of their hearts, who having been being-in-pain-away-from-themselves (having 'stuffed their pain' and callused their feelings) have given themselves over in the sensuality (or, for the sensual pleasure) towards (the) practice/doing/profit/gain of every/any/all uncleanness/impurity in 'having more'/greediness/ covetousness.” Eph. 4:17-19

These passages clearly convey to us that **there are sinful patterns which we were taught in our family systems growing up, which tend to follow us throughout our lives.** It may be particular sins of our parents which are repeated in our generation, or by which we are still affected. Or, it may be some underlying messages which set us up for these, or similar behaviors. Nearly all of us have grown up with aspects of an erroneous world view which were passed along to us by those around us. They taught and modeled unhealthy, ungodly strategies for living. These became the “default patterns” in our thinking and expectations. These beliefs and practices set us up for self-defeating, ineffective behavior in our own lives. Following are some observations:

1. These passages are addressed to Christians. This is a part of the “fight of faith”, the struggle to renew our minds and experience the full measure of our inheritance in Christ. Christians are not perfect; they need to grow.

2. We learn many of these patterns from our family systems. They are habits, customary ways in which we have learned to respond to life situations. They become a standard, or script, for how to deal with life.

3. The primary motivation is to avoid experiencing pain. Interestingly enough, the Greek word construction indicates that we *don't* actually *escape* the pain by these strategies or attempts. We *continue* to “be-in-pain”, but we *put the pain away-from-us*, somehow. (Gk. word is “apalgeō”, a compound from “apo” [away from] and “algeō” [to be in pain]. Interesting, a modern-day *analgesic* medication (e.g., aspirin, Ibuprofen) is from this same word stem, but with a different prepositional prefix “an-” [without] and “algeō” [hence, to be without pain].) This very act of *denial*, or “stuffing the pain”, is designed to *harden us to being sensitive* to the *immediate* discomfort. It also makes it more difficult to experience additional future pains. Unfortunately, as our hardness ossifies (i.e., begins to “set up” like cement), we find ourselves becoming *imprisoned*. We becoming *deadened* to normal, natural pleasures of daily living. We then try to *mask, cover, or medicate* the pain by immersing ourselves in various forms of pleasure-seeking. Because we are trying to *cover* this unaddressed “hidden pain” (which is *still* there), the pleasures we seek must be *more extreme, more powerful* than our backlog of pain to effectively drown it out. We must also obtain such pleasurable, distracting experiences *over and over again* (virtually *continually*), or we begin to get in touch with the pain or inner emptiness *again*. The danger of sin increases with this inordinate demand for medication. We begin to look for pleasure in “unclean places”. We can rapidly become enslaved to an *endless search for relief* (addiction).

4. Avoidance doesn't work. Stuffing pain and/or seeking pleasure doesn't solve anything. The *real* issues, the *actual causes* of pain, *remain unaddressed!* These attempts are described as “vain”, “empty”, “worthless”, and “futile”. They lead further and further into darkness, deception, enslavement, and alienation from God.

5. There is another way, a way that does work. It is to walk in the light and life of God. It requires a “putting *off* of the old man and its evil practices”, a conscious disavowal and disowning of the strategies that we have devised or employed that are not of God, i.e., are not walking in the truth (Eph. 4:20-22). We must “get real”, not be false or “pseudo” with each other or with God. We do this by confessing our sins to God, and possibly to others, as well (Eph. 4:25; I Jn. 1:5-2:2; Jas. 5:13-18). To break the power of the darkness, we have to get our lives into the light. **Things that are hidden remain points where we can be attacked.** We hide things because we are afraid to make them known. It is the enemy who is attempting to use these fears to control us, to keep us in bondage.

In Ephesians 4:17-19, we see how **the apostle Paul earnestly seeks to motivate us to turn away from a mode of living life that excludes God.** He described how “the Gentiles”, who had no special covenants or relationship with God, navigated through life as though they were following a faulty map. Their perceptions of the world around them, especially in relation to God, were *distorted* and *incomplete*. Being “alienated away from the life of God ...because of ignorance ...[and] hardness of heart”, they have attempted to *deal with life on their own*. In their attempt to *manage* the anxiety and inner discomforts of life, they learned to “stuff their pain” and go after sensual pleasure in order to feel

better, and be comforted. From *this fundamental orientation*, they developed *innumerable ways to cope*, ...strategies of denial, dishonesty, and inordinate pleasure-seeking. **This approach to life must be put aside, if we are to discover and fulfill the purposes and potential which God intends for us to experience.**

These verses offer a classic description of how we all attempt to live our lives when we see no other options. **With amazing insight, the apostle describes in a few words the fundamental principles by which humanity has been operating ever since our first parents fell in the Garden of Eden.** In more extreme and drastic forms, we see these principles played out in the **cycles of addiction** which entrap so many. Because some activity or experience (alcohol, drugs, food, money, sex, power, speed, danger, luxury, music, activity, work, religious activities or experiences, sports, television, games, etc.) seems to relieve or “cover” an inner emptiness, discomfort, awkwardness, sleeplessness, boredom, anxiety, ...(You name it!), people tend to gravitate toward the positive experiences. **Addiction happens when a person discovers that a certain activity seems to work consistently to cover or relieve this inner pain, and they begin to rely on that experience more and more to “escape” or “medicate” the pain.**

God seems to have designed the universe (or us) in such a way that **no created thing can really fulfill us forever.** Every experience in which we might find *temporary relief* eventually will no longer do for us what it once did. There is a “law of diminishing returns” which seems to operate in any activity or experience that we might begin to focus on as *the “source of life” or the “solution to our problems”*. **Any substitutions we make for God (idolatry) or reality (denial, deception, “escape”) will eventually be shown to be inadequate.**

In the first place, when we attempt to escape or “medicate” our pain, we choose a “substitute” that has nothing to do with solving the original problem that causes our pain. Once the good feeling of our substitute begins to fade, the original problem remains. Nothing has been accomplished to alleviate the real issues involved. Many times, in fact, the original problem has become *more difficult* because we have not tended to it immediately.

Secondly, our problem can be magnified by the “side effects” or “costs” of our substitute. Most of us are familiar with that principle with regard to drugs. The temporary good feeling they offer usually is followed by a “down side”. Eventually, the negative effects can be so deep that the person begins to take their “drug of choice” just to feel *normal!* Often, the side effects will destroy the person's health, or the disorientation they cause will result in the loss of motivation or effectiveness on the job, and matters get worse and worse. *All sensuality seems to be that way. Too much of a good thing usually causes difficulty somewhere else.* **Life was designed to be lived with balance and honesty, dealing with things “straight up”.** When we do not live *this way*, we *complicate* our existence. When we “stuff pain and go after a substitute pleasure” is falling into the “buy now and pay later” trap that world continually bombards us with. **We are “mortgaging” our emotional future in order to get a positive experience now.**

These two realities [-- namely, (1.) escape and avoidance do *not* solve the original problem; and (2.) often our method for escape will itself *add to* our debt-load of pain --] together **fuel the unending “greediness” for sensual experiences that Paul alluded to** in vs. 19 (literally, “having-much”). Because our avoidance leaves the original source of pain unaddressed, and because any out-of-balance attempts at feeling-better have a “down side” which actually *adds to our deficit*, we end up feeling *as bad, or worse, than when we started.* We again feel the need for another pleasurable experience. We want to avoid and escape the inner discomfort we feel, as much, or even *more than*, we did before. **The “vanity” or “futility” of the human mind is that this tendency toward (1.) avoiding what is uncomfortable, but real; and (2.) substituting a “feel-good” experience is a strategy for dealing with life's unpleasant realities, uncertainties, and disappointments which is ineffective and unending.** The *repelling-power* of the avoidance, and the *pull* of the *positive* experiences, are so *immediate*, so *strong*, and so *much a part of us*, that we just “go for it”, ...and we “go for it”, ...and we “go for it” *again and again* in an unending cycle, usually *unaware* of what we are doing.

Notice, as you read on in Ephesians 4, that **there is a faith decision to be made (vss. 20-24), as well as a practical prescription for living life (vs. 25ff.).** The faith decision has to do with **(a.) consciously recognizing what God has done for you in Christ**, i.e., He has put your old self to death with Him and put within you a new power for living; **(b.) choosing to count on that as true** by consciously refusing to give in to old attitudes and behaviors (“putting off the old”) and by consciously looking for a new attitude in which to approach life, one that recognizes that God is with you (“be renewed in the spirit of your mind” and “put on the new person”); and **(c.) choosing to act in ways that are consistent with the life of the Spirit which is in you.**

This leads right into the practical prescriptions Paul gives for living life (the “therefore” actions which are described in verses 25 and following). It is significant to see that **the first things that Paul prescribes have to do with not hiding or “stuffing” our emotions.** “Therefore putting off *phoriness*, each one of you *speak what is honest* with the one who is near him/her, for we are members one of another. Be angry (Yes, we are *commanded* to be angry with *appropriate anger*. It is a God-given emotional ability, which is intended to *motivate us to act* in a healthy way.), and do not sin; deal with things before the day is over, and do not give the devil an opportunity.” **Holy living comes out of healthy living.**