

Theme: Seeing the larger picture

This edition

- Pieces of the puzzle
- The elements of change

Pieces of the puzzle

In the most recent edition of Notes for Leaders we discussed pornography and how it is symptomatic of character problems and other issues in a person's life. This raises the question of how all these factors relate to one another and how people really change. Let's look at how all the pieces of the human puzzle are put together from God's perspective.

It is interesting to notice that new mental health problems are cropping up in our modern era. For example, in the year 2010, forty people died every day of painkiller abuse in the USA (www.cdc.gov). The growing level of abuse of synthetic heroin (Trade names: Vicodin, Percocet: Chemical names: oxycodone, hydrocodone) is bypassing all other forms of drug abuse. Among high school students, 1 in 10 is now addicted to painkillers. These modern maladies are not really new; the problems we face have always been with us.

From a biblical perspective, we have three key points of reference that help us understand people. First, we know we were created in God's image. Secondly, we know the image of God in mankind has been significantly marred by sin and separation from God. Thirdly, there is a transformation that needs to take place in a believer's life so that he or she will begin to experience restoration back to the original image of God. We can use these points of reference to determine where we are in the ongoing transformation process.

We also have the unique advantage as Christians of understanding how people are put together. There is a unity and wholeness in God's design of people. We are spiritual, emotional, physical beings; each element is influenced by the others and they are completely integrated. Yet, we often diagnose problems as either being strictly spiritual (a sin issue for a pastor to deal with), emotional (a psychological problem for a psychologist to deal with) or physical (a medical problem for a doctor to deal with). There certainly are unique aspects of each dimension and benefits of specialized care, but we can lose sight of the whole person when our thinking is limited to these categories.

Let's put the above stated principles to work in a real situation: A 50-year-old pastor is diagnosed with high blood pressure. Is medication the best way to control the high blood pressure? After all, this is a "medical problem." Before you answer that question, consider these other factors: 1. He has a short-temper and is often angry or frustrated with things not working out like he wants. 2. He has many social contacts, but no close friends. 3. He has very high expectations of himself and pushes himself to succeed. He often feels like a failure for not seeing more success in ministry. 4. For years he has neglected the needs of his wife and has told her to stop complaining. 5. He cannot remember the last time he sensed God's presence in his life. He goes through the motions of prayer, but does it just out of duty. 6. He eats a diet high in salt, drinks a lot of caffeine, and eats mostly processed foods (crackers, chips, packaged foods). He does not exercise and is overweight. 7. He has no hobbies but often watches TV late into the night. His life is the church.

Does he have a medical problem, an emotional problem, or a spiritual problem? Where does one problem begin and the other end? What if you started talking with this pastor and after a good bit of discussion you heard him say, "I just cannot shake the image I have in my mind of my father telling me I would never amount to anything." What would you do with that bit of information? Would you dismiss it as unimportant history that should be ignored or would you go to the other extreme and see the pastor as a victim of his past dysfunctional family

system? Because of the Bible, we are able to see all the elements of life in their proper perspective.

The elements of change

God is in the growth and development business. Look at the oceans and the land around us teeming with life—everything grows according to his plan. We too are a part of God's fabulous living, growing creation. We, like the plants and animals, will grow when we receive the basic elements necessary for growth as individuals. Growth is less about what we "do" and more about something that happens. We will grow if we receive what we need—guaranteed. What do we need? Grace, truth, and time.

We are designed to be in an intimate relationship with God and others. Intimacy means knowledge. We are meant to be known and to know God and others. This kind of intimacy requires safety and trust. We experience safety and trust when our relationships follow the pattern of God's relationship with us. God reaches out to us with acceptance, affection (love), and affirmation. He invests in us for the purpose of our growth. When we are on the receiving end of God's grace, we grow. When we experience grace in our human relationships, we grow. The person God designed you to be will develop, all on its own. God also provides guidance and sets limits. This is truth. We need truth to know where to go, what is wrong, what our limits are, and what we are responsible for.

We unfortunately do not follow the pattern that God has provided. Grace and truth are missing in most of our relationships. Anything that falls short of God's best plan for our lives causes pain. We experience pain for two reasons: 1. We fail to follow God's guidance (we sin). 2. We are in relationships that fail to follow God's pattern (we are hurt by the sin of others). Pain leads to two specific problems: Hiding and suffering. We hide because the real person God has created is not developed. Hiding is the opposite of intimacy. We do not want others or God to see us. We struggle with shame and guilt. We don't even want to look inside at ourselves. The real person that God has designed me to be cannot grow without grace and truth. I cannot will growth to happen on my own.

This is where time comes into the picture. There are two kinds of time, redemptive time and bad time. When we bring what is hidden out into the light so that grace and truth can transform and develop who we are (our character) we gradually get better over time—this is redemptive time. Too often we choose to remain in hiding and use two basic strategies to manage our pain—avoidance and control. When we fail to deal with our pain, we become preoccupied with managing it. The more committed we are to not accepting pain, the more we suffer. Suffering is our unwillingness to accept pain. When we are not able to accept pain we try to either avoid it (arranging our life to escape what is unpleasant, finding pleasurable distractions, becoming addicted) or control it (hoping that we can change our negative thinking with positive, use medications to reduce emotional pain, control others to our liking, and suppress our unwanted thoughts and feelings). Being locked in this pattern of control and avoidance, we not only suffer, but we remove our pain from redemptive time. Our pain stays in our past, is recreated again and again in the present, and never changes. In bad time, time passes, but nothing changes.

Without being aware of what we are doing, when we face pain we create explanations for all that has happened and is happening to us. Without the benefit of God's grace and truth shining into our life, all of our explanations are completely wrong and arbitrary. We believe what we feel about ourselves. We believe the evaluations and judgments we have made are correct. We engage in a mental battle of words that we cannot possibly win. God invites us to quietly stop fighting, look around us and see what is happening, and leave the battle field. When we are transparent with God, honest with ourselves, and truthful with others, we place ourselves in a position where intimacy can occur and grace and truth can enter our life. Growth is guaranteed, but it takes time.