

CLEAR THE AIR: Burning Issues Confronting Christians Today

Sermon #5: HELPING, NOT HURTING THOSE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Various Scriptures

There are many sincere believers who to the best of their ability, are walking according to the Scriptures and yet are suffering from emotional symptoms. Many of them have been judged for their condition and given half-truths and clichés by well-meaning but ill-informed fellow believers. On the other hand, many Christians are intolerant, if not prejudiced, against individuals with emotional difficulties. Most view all such problems as due to personal sin.

How do we help, not hurt, those among us who have mental health issues? Let's answer Four Questions towards this:

WHY DO WE HAVE THE "WOUNDED" AMONG US?

- Mental health disorder is a disease with genetic, psychosocial, and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations. Genetic factors increase or decrease the level of vulnerability to this problem, but no one is predestined to have it on a purely genetic basis.
- For any particular disorder, and for each specific individual, we must try to determine reasonably how much is due to the environment, by genetics or by the individual's choice. This will help tailor the treatment for the person, rather than a shotgun approach.

IN WHAT WAYS DO WE SHOOT OUR WOUNDED (EVEN UNINTENTIONALLY)?

- By saying or believing these or similar statements. Some of us must repent for these:
 - "It's purely a sin problem."
 - "No one who is right with the Lord has a nervous breakdown."
 - "Don't seek professional help."
 - "If you yield your life to Jesus, you will never need psychological help."
 - "The need for medications is from the devil."

HOW CAN WE HELP OUR WOUNDED?

If the church will be the loving community described in Scripture, it can play a tremendous therapeutic role in the lives of people who, though spiritually resurrected, are still bound by physical weakness and emotional illness:

1) The Church must become a Safe Place for the Struggling:

- Romans 15:1: The strong play a pivotal role in providing an atmosphere of acceptance, love, understanding and help for the weaker brother and sister.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:14: The church must become a community where there is love, acceptance, encouragement, forgiveness and compassion; where the person of Christ is lifted high and God's Word is never compromised; but also where there is openness to use all available methods that are not contrary to his Word.

- Ephesians 3:17-19: We grow best when we have been rooted in an atmosphere of genuine human love. This process of total acceptance seems a prerequisite for comprehending the greatness of God's love in the passage.
- James 5:16: The church should be the expert in spiritual counseling. Appropriate spiritual counseling will resolve issues such as salvation, forgiveness, personal morality, God's will, the scriptural perspective on divorce and more.

2) Stop the Stigmatization

The challenge for all of us is to be understanding and gentle with the broken believer, even if sin and personal responsibility are involved but not to be "soft" on the sin itself. The Christian community should show them compassion and kindness that will facilitate their obedience to God's truth. Then they will be better able to sense God's acceptance and understanding of their predicament, as well as His desire to help them do all they are able to do. The worst thing we can do is to be ashamed of them or make them feel ashamed of themselves.

But the Church Can't Meet Every Need

Some emotional illnesses (those with a clinical diagnosis and a primarily physical basis) may require more than a church support system can offer. They may need to be referred to a Christian psychologist or psychiatrist.

WHAT CAN THE "WOUNDED" DO?

- 1) We first need to be honest with ourselves. This is necessary for the next step of being honest before God (Psalm 139:23-24).
- 2) Prayer, Obedience and Personal Responsibility: If my problem is strictly a spiritual one, its answer lies in God's Word. Sin needs to be confessed and forsaken (1 Jn. 1:9). Suffering with an emotional illness doesn't alter my need to be obedient to God's expressed will. God does not hold us responsible for what we can't control, but He does hold us responsible for what we can do something about.
- 3) Seek a Caring Body of Believers: Find a group of people with whom you are accepted.
- 4) Be Willing to Seek Professional Help: If there's any possibility that a biological basis exists, be sure to see someone who can diagnose and treat such a problem.

Final Thoughts:

We must keep in mind that God, our Good Shepherd, does not scold the sheep for getting lost. He knows their wandering was traumatic enough. He joyfully picks up his sheep and throws a party for the lost one that was found. You are His sheep, and He knows you by name; He loves and cares for you.

My prayer is that we Christians will develop a greater understanding and a more helpful approach to people with emotional difficulties – one that will neither let people evade choices they need to make nor add guilt to the burden they are already carrying. Instead, we will help them sort out the various causes, seek appropriate help and feel the support of their church community throughout their journey toward health and wholeness.