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🌿 STEP 1 🌿

Ruined

Handling Injury

“Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”

🌿 MATTHEW 5:44

Life is not risk- or pain-free. No one gets through it without being hurt by another person. Some people, I’ve found, seem to make a habit of hurting others. Perhaps they spoke an unkind word or passed a thoughtless remark; maybe they joined in the gossip; they cheated in a business deal; they were inattentive as parents; they were unappreciative children; they disappointed in a time of crisis; they broke their vows. Regardless, the pain of betrayal is the same. We feel violated, having to deal with an injury caused by someone else for no deserving reason.

We’ll all be betrayed, hurt, and wronged many times over in this life. We’ll all have volumes of injuries and bruises to store in our “warehouses.” To forgive, to set ourselves free of accu-

mulated pain and betrayal, we must first recognize that we are injured and then begin to heal.

Something to Learn (Path)

"I feel like roadkill on the highway of love," said Marty philosophically as he sat in my office one day, "and I ain't gonna be that for nobody!" It was Susan's series of affairs that finally led to their divorce. She'd always leave the house with a new explanation, but Marty knew she was lying.

"She kept promising me she would stop, but she didn't," he explained. "All I have left is this emptiness inside and a broken heart. It's the worst feeling in the world to be dumped for another person." His face was red, his teeth were clenched, and the veins in his forehead threatened to pop. "I'll get even with Susan if it's the last thing I do!"

Marty is dancing our first step: *Ruined*.

We've All Danced This Step

As noted, because we live in an imperfect world, we've all been hurt. Our deepest hurts have come from other people. Believe it or not, relationships are the greatest source of stress in our lives. Not jobs, not money, not housing, food, clothing, or commerce. Who we relate with, and who relates back, can make life worth living—or fill us with revenge. Our relationships can also be our greatest blessing and our greatest joy. But people do hurt us, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes accidentally, and sometimes on purpose.

For some, being betrayed by a relationship means being abused physically, emotionally, or verbally as a child, being pushed around or put down, beaten up, or berated. "You'll never amount to anything!" "You're not smart enough, pretty enough, or good enough." Unfortunately, such betrayals don't have an expiration date; they stretch on and on into other areas

of life long after they have occurred. Many carry these wounds well into adulthood and throughout the rest of their lives, always wondering if those angry words and insults were true and deserved; always doubting themselves.

For others betrayal means being injured by a spouse who walks out one day, leaving only a note (“I’m out of here. Don’t even try to contact me”), three young children to raise, and a mountain of unpaid bills. Or it could be a spouse who sticks around, but constantly takes the other for granted and betrays emotional trust; in short, a person who sucks the joy out of life through negative, controlling, selfish, and hypocritical behavior.

Families account for some of the most joyous and disappointing relationships. Fairness of the give-and-take balance develops a sense of trust between family members. Trustworthiness builds assurances that one’s needs will be met without manipulation or threats of retaliation. Often that trustworthiness breaks down because someone feels betrayed.

Unfortunately, hurts in families can last for years, cutting both wide and deep, and can even be passed down through generations. We’ve all heard these comments: “I haven’t talked to my sister since I left home at eighteen,” or “No one associates with Uncle Joe after he ran Dad’s business into the ground twenty-three years ago.”

Blaming God

Friends, family, colleagues, neighbors: who is left to cause us hurt in this life? Well some believe even God causes injury. When “God” disappoints us, we become upset and carry a grudge. For many people, in fact, this becomes the ultimate betrayal. When I encounter people with a grudge against God, almost universally it wasn’t a prolonged series of events that caused so much pain, but usually one single tragic incident.

A young couple I know has been carrying a grudge against God for nearly ten years. Their beautiful five-year-old daughter

died shortly after being stricken with a brain tumor. They grew bitter. They didn't quit going to church; they still went through all the motions. But they no longer believed in prayer. They're afraid to disown God; afraid to call God a liar or unfaithful. But there is no question about their deep-seated grudge and the wedge it has caused between themselves and their spiritual life. They've said it on several occasions, "We'll never forgive God for taking away our only child."

In our hospital cafeteria one day I heard two men talking.

One asked, "Have you been to church lately?"

The other one replied, "No, not since my father died. God knew how much I loved my father! And I haven't been back to church since."

Clearly this man's pain is evident and he was very quick to assign the blame. What can be done to reverse the tide, heal the pain, and dissolve the wedge between resentment and forgiveness? Given the immense hurt inflicted on us, it's hardly surprising if we struggle with forgiveness in this early dance step.

Revenge Points Back

We find forgiveness hard to do and, if accomplished, even harder to sustain; so we avoid it at all costs. We latch onto the popular stance of holding others forever accountable. We somehow believe that if we stamp out the offender (who, of course, deserves to be eliminated or at least "taught a lesson") we'll feel good and our personal world will be a safe and happy place.

Our culture encourages us. Revenge is for the strong, the vital, the honorable, the American; forgiveness, on the other hand, is for wimps. Revenge is "only right," "an eye for an eye," and all that implies. But what is revenge if not the vain attempt to right a wrong that can't be taken back, disavow words that can't be unspoken, or erase a memory that is indelible? Revenge is our attempt to go back in time, to right what was wrong, to "put it all back together again."

In many ways we can see revenge as the gun in our hand, ready to fire, only this gun only points in one direction; straight back at our faces! We only hurt ourselves with vengeful thoughts, vengeful acts, and vengeful obsessions. Grudges become frozen in time and hatchets are never buried. The hurt we feel is very real, very deep, and sometimes very private. Most people, even those closest to us, don't understand the depth of the hurts we carry as a result of the emotional injuries we have experienced. We assume that we must be strong and not show weakness; not let the person who hurt us, or even others who are close to us, know how damaged, broken, and injured we feel. Above all, we must not give in and forgive. The message of Jesus is counter to all this. He says to forgive seven times seventy, no matter the offense, and even from the cross he cried, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing." That is *real* strength.

Why Is This Happening?

Perhaps the worst part about betrayal is that we didn't invite, solicit, or deserve what was done to us. It simply happened. "Why is this happening to ME?" we ask, finding our only answer to be more pain, suffering, and confusion. It takes some time to process the actual meaning of our hurt and its long-term effects. Imagine finding out that your spouse has been having an affair. In our opening anecdote, Marty had long suspected his wife, Susan, of infidelity but, in most cases, as in his, we simply can't believe it.

Here is the person we chose to be with forever, 'til death do us part; here is our soulmate, whom we swore an oath to love, honor, and cherish—and this person betrayed us? Shock isn't the word for how we feel. Worse still, we may not want to accept the facts and choose not to believe it for some period of time. As a result we live in limbo, halfway between the life we had and the life we should be living. Unable to go back, unable to move forward, we are literally stuck to dwell in our pain and grief.

When injury happens to us, our first reaction is disbelief. We express our disbelief in various ways: "I can't believe it happened." "I just can't get over it"; "It happened out of the blue"; "I was just stunned by it"; "I'm completely taken aback by..." "It's the worst thing that could have happened to me." These are natural responses. We feel numb during this time and can hardly express any feelings, other than simply repeating, parrot-like, the above phrases. The process works subtly, giving us moments away from our pain and allowing us to pace our feelings of hurt. It's nature's way of letting in only as much as we can handle; consider this period life's version of your car's shock-absorbers.

Since we often don't know how to cope with our hurts, our response is to turn to things that usually mess us up and cause more problems in our lives. We drink too much, smoke too much, eat too much, sleep too much, spend too much to bury our pain. These are temporary stop-gap measures that only put us in more pain when the bill comes due: the hangover the next morning or the extra weight that causes us to feel even more insecure.

The only way to break out of limbo, to move forward, is to stop this cycle of avoidance. This is a dance, remember, and what dance do you know where you just stand still? None. To keep dancing toward forgiveness, you need to avoid two poor moves: denial and hiding. And if you insist on keeping these in your repertoire—welcome to misery.

Denial: Never Happened

I don't know about you, but there have been times in my life when others hurt me and I pretended my hurt didn't exist. I often ignored the elephant sitting across the table from me! I would sit under its weight and pretend it was light as a feather. In truth, I was hoping it would go away before I had to actively take stock and do something about it. Isn't this human nature?

Obviously the pain was real, the betrayal was an actual event, and the offender was someone close to me, but for the sake of survival it was easier to put on a perfect smile and pretend “it” wasn’t happening. “She hurt me?” I might ask as if surprised. “Who, me? No way; her comment rolled right off my back. I didn’t give it a second thought.”

Then I would bite the bullet. Suck it up. Suffer in silence. Hope it will go away. Flat out denial; “Nothing happened,” sprinkled with minimizing; “It was no big deal. She didn’t hurt me that badly”; and procrastination; “I’ll deal with this, just as soon as....” So, we avoid it, postpone it, play it down, and do nothing about it. We sweep it under the carpet and just put it off. But where do you think it goes? Does it disappear, never to be seen again? Or does it snowball while we’re not looking, growing bigger and bigger until it’s simply too big to avoid any longer? I think you know the answer.

A short period of denial may be beneficial, providing us with time to adjust to our hurt. In fact, this phase can be part of the healing process; being in denial temporarily helps us to cope with the hurt we want to ignore. It gives our mind the opportunity to unconsciously absorb shocking or distressing information at a pace that won’t send us into a tailspin.

When denial persists, however, and prevents us from dealing with our pain, it becomes harmful. It’s like the weekend warrior who sprains his ankle on Saturday and tries to be “tough” about it. If he waits a little while to watch and see if the swelling goes down on its own, he’s only being prudent. But if he waits until the middle of the week when the ankle is simply too painful to walk on, prudence has turned into carelessness.

Certainly, running to the ER every time we stub our toe is counterproductive, but waiting too long to address a real injury can mean it’s too late for complete healing. Eventually, we simply can’t ignore it any longer.

I'm not saying it's naïve or irresponsible to slip into denial when we are hurt, but when we use denial as a way to cope with and solve our hurts, we are strapping on inner tubes to survive tidal waves! Sure, in the beginning of the storm, we can blissfully float through the situation, letting the inner tubes of denial keep us afloat. But eventually, our hurts will only get worse, flooding our heads with feelings we'll find hard to shake loose. Our inner tubes will form holes and, before we know it, we'll begin to sink from our own denial. If you have ever felt like you were drowning or sinking, this is a sign that denial is slipping out of control. Choosing to live with denial isn't coping; it's copping out. It's perpetually dancing the same routine over and over again and *never getting anywhere*.

Hiding: Nothing's Wrong

We've all got plenty of hurts to go around: a lost friendship; a bitter, painful breakup; someone we love, but who doesn't love us; a job we didn't get; a promotion we deserved but missed out on because we were too young, too old, or too in between; a loved one who has died; a violation; a betrayal; a rejection; a nasty fight. Unless we are born with rhinoceros skin, these things hurt us. Rather than deal with our hurts out loud, however, too often we keep them all to ourselves; we hide from the truth.

We say, "Who could I tell anyway? Who would listen? My friends are so busy with their own lives. Everyone has problems, why bother them with mine?" We wear a mask and camouflage them. We keep them all inside, where no one else can see them, hiding behind a smiling exterior.

Have you ever seen the episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* where Andy, Barney, Opie, and friends are having a hootin', hollerin' time enjoying the Christmas holidays at Mayberry's police headquarters? Unlike most jails, this one comes complete with a Christmas tree, plenty of presents, music, good food, and great friends.

Department store owner Ben Weaver wants in on the fun—but he’s too cranky and isolated to admit that he’s alone for the holidays. Instead of simply asking to join in, he tries to get arrested. From loitering to littering, he’s proof positive that “you can’t even get arrested in this town.” Finally, Andy realizes that Ben is all alone and simply wants to belong, so he “arrests” him on Christmas Eve. If only Ben would have opened up to America’s nicest sheriff, the incarceration wouldn’t have shown up on his permanent record!

How often are we like old Ben, too full of pride or hurt or isolation to admit that we’re hurting, admit that we’re in pain, and seek the help and companionship we need? Unfortunately, most people aren’t as sensitive as the fictional Andy Griffith and only catch on when we yell and scream and shout.

Our hurts run very deep and we don’t realize that all of our accumulated hurts influence everything we do. We wear nice clothes and have a pleasant smile, but the reality is we’ve been hurt very deeply and simply aren’t the same as we were before it happened. Sometimes we play a game called “Is something wrong?” We always answer, “No, nothing’s wrong.”

We try to hide our hurts by eating or drinking too much, or by watching too much TV. Sometimes we distract ourselves in positive ways through exercise, creating things, learning new hobbies. Either way, however, denial is denial and the result is the same: We hide our hurts, don’t express them, and thus do not heal them.

The hurt doesn’t just go away. In fact, our pain is very, very good at lurking, loitering, and hiding. It can recede into the dark corners of the soul and cloak itself in every beat of our heart. A friend of mine had an Easter egg hunt and she could have sworn she dyed and hid three dozen eggs, only the kids came back with just 35! Where did that last egg go? Only too late she realized she had hidden it in the den. By then the egg had spoiled and created a nasty smell that took weeks to air

out. Hurt is like that; we can hide our pain so well, and try to forget about it, until it's too late.

Everyone has been hurt. It's different for each, yes, but *everyone* has been hurt. You're not alone. You're not even the only one with the hurt you've got. You may think you are. You may think you're the only one in the world who has suffered this way. But there are others that have the same hurt you do.

Our hurts are legitimate. It is silly to pretend that someone didn't hurt us when, in fact, they did. Even if it was unintentional, pretending it didn't hurt is being dishonest with ourselves, which only compounds the original hurt. After all, if we can't be honest with ourselves, who is left to turn to? We know that it really did hurt, and when we deny that this particular pain exists, we waste our time trying to convince ourselves otherwise.

We don't heal ourselves by denial or hiding; we only delay the inevitable—more pain. To heal our hurts, we have to reconnect with them. We have to bring them out of the closet, attic, or basement where we stashed them and into the living room of our lives.

By coming out from under the burden of silence and acknowledging the hurt and brokenness from our injuries, we experience freedom. We are finally able to let go of the masks we have been hiding behind and let down our guard. Only in the light, with God's help, can we fully feel the hurt, heal it, and deal with it. Only then can we be truly healed, and only then can we be freed from the pain that binds us.

Own It: It's Mine

For us to receive the healing of emotional hurts, we must first own that we are hurting. Jesus tells us in Matthew 9:12: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do." There is no shame in feeling pain, and there's no time limit on how long you can hurt. But the sooner you admit you need help, the sooner you can get it.

Something to Consider (Ponder)

In the movie *Avalon* (1990), Uncle Gabriel stopped talking to his family members for the rest of his life because they started Thanksgiving dinner without him after he was excessively late for the zillionth time.

Who can't relate to either side of this common *faux pas*? If you were waiting for your own Uncle Gabriel for the zillionth time, wouldn't you be tempted to at least nibble on the drumstick sitting there so temptingly on your plate? And if you were Uncle Gabriel, wouldn't you be sorely tempted to feel betrayed by this obvious "slight"?

But forever? What a waste of energy it is to stay angry for decades when with a simple discussion the future can open up like an empty, unbroken road of forgiveness just waiting to be traveled. But don't trust me; rent the movie for yourself and think about something a parishioner named Rhonda once told me: "It only takes a minute to cause hurt but sometimes a lifetime to repair. Be careful with your words and actions."

Something to Do (Practice)

To begin the dance to forgiveness, take a moment and think about a time when someone hurt you. Write down the name of the person (even if he or she is no longer living and you haven't resolved it) who has injured you in some way. Perhaps someone said something thoughtless or hurtful, or someone was neglectful of your feelings or needs; maybe it was a critical parent, a controlling spouse, or a cutthroat colleague.

See this person sitting in front of you, at a distance that feels comfortable to you. If for any reason it is not comfortable for you to invite this person into the sacred space that you have created with your imagination—envision him or her behind a wall of glass or in a room across from yours or see them on the TV screen; be creative and do what feels comfort-

able. Consider the ways you have been injured. Silently, but clearly, acknowledge this, saying something like “Regarding this person (name them), or situation (name it), I feel hurt.” (You will be amazed by how simply admitting you’re hurt immediately unburdens you.)

During this first dance step, just stop and bring your hurt out of hiding and own it, acknowledge it, and be aware of it. Next, think about how you felt at the time of the “injury.” Feel how hurt or angry or disappointed or resentful you felt. On a scale of 0-10, how strong was your hurt? (Zero being none at all and ten being the strongest you have ever felt anything.)

Now pour out your feelings by writing them down. Writing about how we feel and why we are feeling that way can help us to “get it all out,” so that eventually we will be able to release the hurt and move on. Here are some guidelines:

- ✎ Freely write whatever feelings come to you.
- ✎ Write in a private and safe environment.
- ✎ Write about the injuries you are thinking about and which you never disclosed, discussed, or resolved.
- ✎ Write about what happened without troubling over format. Don’t worry about grammar, spelling, or sentence structure.
- ✎ Write out how you feel. Don’t use big words. Simply write: “I feel _____ and _____.” Write out why you feel this way.
- ✎ Remember this isn’t a time to write down your complaints about the injury. Complaining only makes the

*“Give
sorrow
words.”*

SHAKESPEARE



injury worse. It's a time to discover *how* and *why* you feel this way. It's critical that you allow yourself to go deep and touch those deepest feelings.

- ☞ Take it slowly. The deepest hurts are wrapped up in a lot of confusion and pain, so go easy on yourself and take your time.

I have discovered that to dance to forgiveness and improve how we feel, we must first endure difficult feelings. The more we own our hurt, the more likely we can dance effective steps to move toward healing.

Something to Say (Prayer)

Gracious God, it is your desire that I have good relationships with the people around me—my family, my neighbors and friends, my sisters and brothers in Jesus. And yet, truth be told, there are people in my life with whom my “good” relationships have been broken. I have been hurt; the pain lies deep within my soul. I withhold my love and friendship because of the hurt within.

Lord, I know there are people in my life that I need to forgive. But there are some people I just can't forgive on my own. I need you, O Lord, to give me the words, the desire, the ability to dance through the hurt that leads to forgiveness.

Empower me, O Lord, so that I might embrace the hurt, face my own fears, or in some cases, swallow my own pride, that I might work on forgiving those who have hurt me. If I am going to be whole, O Lord, I must heal the hurt within. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.