



The Struggle for Inner Peace

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LESSON 6: OTHER FAULTY PATTERNS

Another "mental mechanism" or means of getting your own way is regression. To regress is simply to revert to childish ways of reacting to unpleasant situations.

How does a child get his own way? A couple in church were trying to keep their two-year-old quiet. The little fellow insisted on standing up in the pew, but his father wanted him to sit down. The boy slipped from the seat and started to crawl into the aisle. The father picked him up and forcibly held him on his lap. The child then let out a shriek; despite both parents' frantic efforts to quiet him he continued crying loudly. There was nothing to do but for the father to hurry out of the church with the boy.

The youngster won the round, even if it meant he would get a spanking. He wanted to get free from the confinement of the pew, and he did.

A child will resort to tears, screams, temper tantrums, or sulking to get his way. He will break things, fight, throw up, refuse to eat, or become generally hard to manage. He finds that such methods work amazingly well in getting what he wants. Because of past successes, he is reluctant to give up his tried and proven means to an end.

But, as he grows, he learns that his childish techniques must be abandoned or at least restrained; he learns that other people have rights that must be respected. He discovers that to live happily, he must accept the fact that he cannot always satisfy his wants and desires. He learns, for example, that honor, respect, praise, and love come not from demand or by force but because they are earned by work, honest effort, and continuous adjustment to changing circumstances.

CHILDISH BEHAVIOR BY "GROWN-UPS"

The person who progresses steadily from childhood into adulthood shifts gradually and quite normally with the situations of life. Sometimes, however, a person will meet rebuffs, disappointments, failure, or tragedy with regressive behavior.

Janet Dean keeps an immaculate house—but her method is to "clam up" if someone walks across her carpet with dusty shoes. Her husband, who is not so fussy about how

the house looks, has learned that he is better off if he spends his spare time tinkering with his tools in the basement instead of sitting in the living room. He doesn't want to run the risk of upsetting his wife.

Mrs. Dean rules the roost; she controls a big, strong, rugged man by the simple device of resorting to a childish form of behavior—pouting.

Jim Carver appears to be a placid man. But those who know him intimately are fully aware that if things go against his liking, he will lose his temper. As his associates give in to his demands, it may appear that they agree with him. But all they are doing is preventing a nasty storm from developing. Hence, he controls a situation by merely threatening to regress to childish behavior.

A business executive came running down one of the long corridors of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Breathlessly he approached the agent at the gate, presented his ticket, and inquired if his plane had departed. The agent shook his head; the executive was too late.

"That's my plane out there, isn't it?" he demanded, pointing to a jet on the concrete apron. Yes, it was his plane. But all preparations had been made for departure and the jet was beginning to taxi away from the boarding site.

"Maybe you don't know who I am," said the man. He was an important officer in a large corporation. The agent said he was sorry but there was nothing he could do. Then, with perhaps 100 persons looking on, the executive exploded.

"I warn you, if you don't get me on that plane I'll personally see that your airline suffers where it hurts—right in the pocketbook! And I'll see that you're the first to suffer."

The executive worked himself into a frenzy, embarrassing himself in front of the agent and spectators. But his blustering behavior did nothing for him—except to chip away at his own self-respect.

Sometimes regressive behavior works; sometimes it doesn't. But even when it succeeds in achieving an objective, it leaves the one who uses it with at least a vague disappointment in himself.

Many of the unhappy people who seek the help of a counselor are getting all they want; but they wake up to the fact that they are out on a limb alone thanks to their childish behavior. Other people avoid or ignore them. Some put up with them for the sake of politeness, or because they have something to gain for their tolerance.

Getting your own way by hysteria, by bullying, by vengeful silence, by cleverness and scheming does not give you contentment. Yet how often we attempt to get our own way by any means we think will work.

THE ROUTE TO MATURITY

Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and personnel directors all agree that regressive behavior is a hindrance to wholesome relationships and a sense of self-respect. The Bible summarizes regression and its antidote in Ephesians 4:31-32. "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice" (v. 31). Clearly this is a description of childish behavior with its excessive emotions and careless, hurtful expression.

"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you" (v. 32). This is an obvious description of a Christian who is "grown up."

Most people who seek counseling say they want to be mature. They want to earn the honor, the admiration, the respect, the faith of others. Not all, however, are willing to recognize that to become such a person is to exercise reasonable self-control. Some are slow to learn the means of avoiding regression to childish behavior.

The Apostle Paul charted the route to maturity in writing to the Colossians. He told the Christians of that city to "put off" anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication, and not to "lie to one another" (Col. 3:8-9). In place of such behavior, he instructed them to "put on" mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, long-suffering, forbearance, and forgiveness (3:12-13).

"But above all these things," Paul continued, "put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful" (3:14-15).

SUPPRESSION AND REPRESSION

Another mechanism that a person may use to achieve his ends is suppression. In literature on psychology, suppression is referred to as a conscious, deliberate, purposeful forgetting or submerging of unpleasant childhood experiences and negative reactions to people and circumstances.

To illustrate: Archie Rudd's father was a demanding, dominating, cruel man. He required Archie to perform a long list of chores letter-perfect. If the boy slipped up or stepped out of line, his dad lashed out at him with severe verbal whippings. Sometimes he required a form of penance, such as writing a thousand times, "I will never again disobey my father."

Archie grew up hating his father. As an adult he repressed the memory of his childhood most of the time. When someone gave him a direct order, however, he saw the image of his father in that person and reacted negatively to him.

Suppression is not limited to experiences of the distant past. Most persons have at some time had the desire to cut down an opponent with a searing remark. Men often confess during counseling that they must exercise great control to keep from hitting their wives. Occasionally, a mother will tell how she must shake off an urge to inflict physical harm on a disobedient child, perhaps with the knife she is using to pare potatoes. In the growing-up process, everyone has known what it is to have desires, emotions, and natural inclinations that are at variance with the demands of society. Unfortunately, the usual way of dealing with non-permissible thoughts is to relegate them to the back of your mind.

Repression also involves submerging or forgetting unhappy past experiences, negative attitudes, aspirations, or feelings. It differs from suppression in that, by repression, the unhappy experiences or attitudes are not pushed out of the mind *knowingly*.

One's collection of gripes, complaints, hates, and suppressed desires and actions can become so great that many of them disappear from memory. Though they no longer come to mind, they are nevertheless there. The fact that they lurk in the shadows is evident by frequent eruptions in the form of touchiness or anxiety. One becomes tense, irritable, uneasy, subject to long silences, sensitive, tired for no explainable reason, full of aches and pains that cannot be corrected by medical treatment. It is obvious that a person who is always in danger of being "upset" or "disturbed" can hardly have a peaceful mind or feel in tune with the people around him. Such persons are not only subject to "upsets" but are in danger of "breakdowns."

Over the last several years, many psychologists have warned of the harm in repression. Some have said that a child should be allowed to grow up as he pleases. If left to himself, he will arrive at a way of life that makes him a happy person and an asset to society. Such management of children, however, has only illustrated the truth of the Bible's warning, "A child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Prov. 29:15).

In the same verse is a statement that to some people is indeed strange, "The rod and reproof give wisdom." The wheel of child rearing turns constantly. Current literature suggests the cycle is drawing near the biblical viewpoint: We *do* need a standard to go by.

Repression would be a wonderful way of escaping if simply forgetting a problem actually removed it. But such is not the case. Harsh, bitter, unforgiving emotions and attitudes are stored up, not eliminated, as long as they remain harsh, bitter, and unforgiving. Every so often something happens that springs open the trapdoor to the dark attic of the mind, and the negative things we thought we had forgotten come rushing out to cause misery to ourselves and others.

If suppression and repression fail as approaches to the harsh realities of life, what does work?

The Bible offers the answer: "Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). It is possible for you to look on the behavior of others and on their treatment of you in a non-condemning, forgiving spirit. To do so is not to whitewash the evils toward you, but to have an attitude toward spiteful persons that will free you from their hurt.

What about the guilt and remorse that stem from memories of the past? Recognition of your sins need not cause you anxiety, for on the heels of recognition is forgiveness and to be forgiven is to find release. "In whom [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:14).

OTHER WAYS TO COPE

Other ways people seek to cope with the pressures that build up within them can only be touched on here.

Extroversion. The extrovert is a person who flees into a constant round of activity in the community, church, club, or place of employment. He is always on the go, always talking, always planning—using activity as a refuge from personal conflict. One person, however, should not judge another's motives. You may think you can distinguish between the one who serves and the one who is merely fleeing from his problems. But you may be completely wrong.

Introversion. The introvert builds a wall around himself. His world is entirely his own. One cannot easily learn his thoughts, desires, plans, dreams, or reactions. Many a man or woman would do well to withdraw from the crowd for serious thinking, to weigh and consider before acting. But this is not what the introvert is doing. He is not pondering in order to make a wise move. He is dodging issues, avoiding decisions, hiding from the world. He is enclosed in his own private supply of thoughts and dreams that will likely never happen.

Compartmental thinking. In a sense, this approach to conflict is to not let the right hand know what the left is doing. An example of this is the man who as a board member is careful to see that the church constitution is upheld, but who will take a drink with a customer, despite the church constitution, because to do so is good business. He will not drink socially because it is against his religious convictions; but business is business. Also in this category is the meticulously neat dresser whose house is an unbelievable mess.

Projection. This is a subtle form of self-deception in which one sees his own faults as belonging to someone or something else. He is the person who has a long list of complaints about his church associates, but who is very sure that the people don't like him. He is the one who is always on the edge of keeping the law but who becomes very critical of lawless people. He is the person who has a secret and in guarding it thinks that everyone is looking at him suspiciously or is talking about him.

THE ALTERNATIVE—SPIRIT-FILLED LIVING

As one studies the mechanisms used to get around the truth, the accuracy of the Bible's description of man's heart as "deceitful" and "desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9) becomes apparent. Thus, you need a resource outside yourself. The qualities that come from God will keep you from faulty handling of truth. They can be yours if you let Jesus Christ implant them in your life. The spiritual man is renewed day by day . . .

In comfort and consolation:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us all in our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

In patience and joy:

Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and long-suffering with joy (Col. 1:11).

In wisdom:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

In righteousness:

And be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Phil. 3:9).

In peace and hope:

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:13).

Questions for review:

1. How does the author define "regressive" behavior? How does the Bible summarize regression and its antidote?
2. What is the difference between suppression and repression? What are the other four methods of coping discussed and what do they involve?

3. Reflect on these behaviors and be honest with yourself on whether you see any of them reflected in your life. If so, how? If so, are you willing to confess this to God and let Him change you?
4. What does the Bible offer as the best approach to the harsh realities of life?
5. Recognition of your sins need not cause you anxiety, for on the heels of recognition is _____ and to be _____ is to find release.

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