



The Struggle for Inner Peace

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

LESSON 9: THE RESPONSIBILITY IS YOURS

What is the key to mental health? How do you achieve and maintain peace of mind? Must you be at the mercy of your circumstances? Is it inevitable that a chance meeting can plunge you into the depths of despair?

Jerome Weller was a happy, successful man—he thought. Then by meeting someone he hadn't seen for 12 years he was, as if by magic, transported backward in time. Even though he sat at his expensive desk in his plush office, with the words "General Manager" on his door and several secretaries at his call, in his mind he was back in Trenton, a bitter, sweating, aching, confused young man who had been fired as the reward for working hard and living a clean life. He was reliving those days in which he lost his car and house and underwent the humiliating experience of moving in with his parents because he was broke. Sitting there now in air-conditioned comfort, this man who ran eight plants and directed the work of hundreds of men had only one thought—*revenge*.

But the Bible commands, "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:17-19).

Mr. Weller knew about these verses. We had also discussed Jesus' words: "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" (Matt. 5:44).

Were these thoughts a challenge to Mr. Weller? Not at first. They were in the Bible, to be sure, and Mr. Weller was a sincere and consistent Bible student. But right at that time these ideas were most unpalatable. To fire his old opponent was a thought that gave him much pleasure. Revenge, vengeance, evil for evil, success, a plush office, money, power—these had not changed his vengeful heart.

He had nearly forgotten the lean years more than a decade ago. But now they came flooding back, and he had to choose forgive or retaliate. The decision was up to him. It was *his reaction* to the past that would tip the balance.

He could not control some of the events of his life. He was the victim of someone's decision 12 years before, no question of that. Now it appeared he was again a victim, this time of a personnel director's decision to hire the one who had wronged him. Suddenly, there the man was, and successful, happy Mr. Weller was plunged into the depths of bitterness and hate.

It appears that circumstances and people dictated Mr. Weller's problem. But *he* was the one who did the reacting. His problem was *within* himself. Would he forgive or get even? It was obvious that the decision to retaliate would not be the key to his peace of mind. Since we know the outcome of his case, we recognize that the key to peace was his receiving from the Lord the power to forgive.

PEACEMAKERS OR FLAME-FANNERS?

Mr. Weller illustrates the struggle men go through to find peace. Bitterness, hatred, and revenge are natural responses to troublesome people and events. But how much better it is to think in terms of making peace, rather than planning someone's destruction. Christ said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9).

Who would think Mr. Weller weak if he forgave the engineer who had wronged him? To forgive is a mark of maturity. And spiritual maturity brings peace, as the psalmist indicated: "Mark the blameless [mature] man, and observe the upright; for the future of that man is peace" (Ps. 37:37).

Do not avenge yourselves; live peaceably with all men; love, bless, forgive. These words place the responsibility for your decision squarely on your own shoulders. This is the essence of good mental health—*it depends on you*. You reap the results of your own decisions, your own reactions.

To get out of the gloomy pit of despair, bitterness, hostility, jealousy, and the accompanying aches, pains, and misery, you must take personal responsibility for your own character, no matter what someone else does—or did. If a man is miserable, it is his choice. His woe is not the result of his background, or the people around him, or his environment, but of a choice, either deliberate or vague, to continue in the direction that he has been heading.

Mr. Weller could have chosen either to forgive or to seek revenge. His misery or peace was due to his choice, which came from within, just as sickness is within a man. A person may have caught cold because he entered the company of persons who had colds. The reason for his cold can be explained. But since he caught a cold, he must be treated for his own cold, no matter how he got it.

So it is with unhappiness. No matter the origin (and the unhappy person can usually explain how he got that way), it is now his responsibility and his alone to take proper

steps to correct the condition that is causing his unhappiness. But it should be mentioned here that understanding alone, without changing one's course, is a dead-end street.

ANSWERABLE FOR OUR ACTIONS

We cannot overemphasize: Man is miserable when he does not take responsibility for his own inner life, his own reactions and behavior toward the people and circumstances that come his way.

Jesus stated an obvious truth, "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). We all have our share of trouble and always will. But the presence of trouble does not alter personal responsibility. "For it is written: 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us shall give account of *himself* to God" (Rom. 14:11-12, italics added). Also, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10).

Being either clearly or vaguely aware that we are answerable for our own conduct, is it any wonder that more and more people become miserable as they forsake biblical principles?

The Bible contains the guidelines that told Mr. Weller what his reaction should be to the people and events of his life. It also contains the guidelines that tell him what he ought to do about the people in his life. For example, Paul spoke plainly about our responsibility to others when he said that no Christian should "put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in... [his] brother's way" (Rom. 14:13).

Jesus said: "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones" (Luke 17: 1-2). Again Jesus said: "Just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (Luke 6:31-32).

The struggle for inner peace, as far as Jerome Weller was concerned, centered in his *reactions* to the engineer and in his decision about what he would *do* about him. When he accepted these responsibilities, he was well on the way to peace because he was then in step with what the Bible commands.

What good news it was that he could have inner peace if he wanted it, that the decisions were his own to make. He need not be a helpless victim of people and events. He himself determined whether or not he would have peace of mind and heart.

HOW DOES OUR PAST SHAPE US?

"Are you ruling out past history as the cause of a person's behavior?" you may ask.

There does appear to be a basis for assuming that past history shapes you. In counseling I generally find that the unhappy person who has been rejected rejects others; the victim of mean, angry, hateful people is also mean, angry, and hateful; the person who grew up in an atmosphere of suspicion is suspicious of others. People seem to reproduce in themselves what they are exposed to.

We would agree that a man's circumstances seem to rub off on him, thereby giving him cause for happiness or discomfort. There is the mark of his parents, experiences with brothers and sisters, relationships gained through church and school activities. He is the product of his family's economic status, his education, his body, his talents, his opportunities.

People who are unhappy have been mistreated. A woman who is withdrawn and sullen often has a mother who was withdrawn and sullen. People appear to be caught up in a circle, a vicious one, forged by generation after generation of example.

Harry and Val Adams were seriously at odds with one another. Among other things, they fought over the issue of going to church. Val insisted that they go for the sake of the children. Harry flatly refused.

"My father was a mean, selfish, two-faced man," he said. "Yet he was looked on at church as a saint. He made us go to church twice on Sunday and every Wednesday. 'But for what?' we kids always wanted to know."

"Sometimes my father and mother would get into a violent argument at the dinner table—less than an hour after dismissal of the Sunday School in which they both taught classes. I vowed that I would abandon church as soon as I got out on my own, and I'm sticking to my word."

As a boy, this man had witnessed some frightening conflicts between his parents. Here he was, carrying on similar quarrels with his wife. The subject was different, but the spirit was the same. He was as inconsiderate of his wife as his father had been of his mother. Despite his protests otherwise, Harry didn't go to church because he didn't want to go—not because of his father.

I once counseled a woman who was extremely "nervous." Her spells came on whenever her husband or children ignored her wishes. In short, she was a selfish woman. She had been pampered and spoiled all her life. Her explanation: "I was raised this way. Can I help it if I have this kind of personality?"

Another woman, recalling her past, remembered how frustrated and angry she became as a child because her mother refused to help her button up her jacket. "I would always

end up with an extra buttonhole on top and a button at the bottom," she said. "Ever since, I have gotten mad when people force me to do something. My husband insists that I put his vitamin pill on his plate for breakfast and I just rebel at this. He can do it just as well himself."

This woman sees red if anyone crosses her, all because she was "buttoned up wrong," or so she believes. She takes no responsibility for her fiery temper. She dismisses it with a shrug, "It's the way I am. My husband knows it, and I get upset if I'm pushed."

These people do reflect their backgrounds. Harry Adams was like his father. The woman who was pampered and spoiled was just like her mother. The other, the one who was "buttoned up wrong," came from a home where tempers flared when anyone was crossed.

It is true that a child tends to absorb the atmosphere in which he was raised. It is also true that people tend to keep on going in the direction in which they are headed. But the Bible says, "You are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things" (Rom. 2:1).

An unhappy person must come to terms with the people in his past, forgive them, and seek to understand the effect they have had on him. But this Bible verse says he has no grounds for reproducing the pattern, once he understands it.

There are happy, contented people who are considerate of others and who also have had difficult pasts. They too have been mistreated and rejected. But they have come to terms with their pasts, forgiving people who did not deserve forgiveness, charting their future courses as persons responsible for their own conduct. They have not produced the kinds of lives they have been exposed to.

SOCIETY'S COP-OUT

Ours is a land with plenty of good food, the best in educational opportunity, excellent transportation, the finest medical care. Yet in the midst of all this, we have a growing number of emotionally disturbed, unhappy, miserable people. Why?

Part of the answer comes in a recently reported interview with Marvin A. Block, widely recognized authority on problem drinking. Dr. Block said that tolerance of drunken behavior has given impetus to consumption of alcohol in the United States. In the areas where drunkenness is not tolerated, there is little alcoholism. But where the control is lax, alcoholism flourishes. He added that people start using alcohol for relaxation and relief from the cares of the day.

This means that in our day it is socially acceptable to turn to a sedative rather than learn to adjust to life. When a man becomes addicted to liquor, we call him sick, and say that

he has a disease—a medical problem. Yet behind this diagnosis is a person who must turn to alcohol to gain his relaxation and to escape from the strain of daily life. Professor O. H. Mowrer uses the term "dis-ease."

We regard the poorly adjusted person the same way we do the alcoholic. We say he is not responsible because he is nervous, maladjusted, upset. He has a personality problem. He suffers from a poor background. We make a medical problem out of his case. There is nothing about his malady that we can see by x-ray or microscope, no germ or virus that the laboratory can detect. But we still call him sick.

How can you expect anything of someone who is sick? This man who is at odds with society and at war with himself must be nursed, favored, carefully handled. What is the result? We tend to reject personal responsibility for our conduct. But the fact of it remains.

TO FOLLOW OR NOT TO FOLLOW

Responsibility for your own conduct is illustrated in the area of physical health. The medical books explain the laws of good health. If you don't want to be tired, you must get enough sleep. If you wish to control your weight, you must not eat large quantities of certain foods. Often these rules interfere with your plans. You may have too many interesting things to do to make time for enough sleep. You may like mashed potatoes covered with gravy, and a pie a la mode too much to push away from the table.

Whether you follow the rules is your choice. The medical books did not create your problem of tiredness or overweight. They only provide the description. It is futile for you to complain about such rigid rules. They may upset you, or cause you to suffer, but the physician cannot repeal them. He can only state them.

"Why am I built so that I must get so much sleep and eat properly?" you may demand to know. "I want to change the rules. "

Can you eliminate your problem by ignoring the laws? Of course not. The man who transgresses the law of sleep is tired; the one who disobeys the rules of proper diet is overweight. Granted there may be other causes of fatigue and being overweight; when these are present, the medical books will help you discover them. But if the medical books do not make a man tired or fat, neither does the Bible create anxieties and frustrations by setting a standard for living. It only describes the standard.

Why must we live by it? The rules are so upsetting you'd like to change them. But the Bible warns: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life" (Gal. 6:7-8).

You can enjoy a full life and a lavish table of food. The process will give you much pleasure. But expect a tired and overweight body. You can ignore the principles of biblical living and enjoy yourself, but don't be surprised at the anxiety, tension, worry, unhappiness, conflict, or misery. We have not freed ourselves and found a life of ease and relaxation by writing off the Bible.

But, you say, there are other causes of these painful symptoms. Of course there are. Your physician can help you discover if there are medical problems involved. These can be corrected by medical means. If the symptoms remain, however, then consider a return to a way of life that is charted in the Bible.

The Bible tells us that we are responsible for the way we treat others and for our own attitudes and conduct. You may be tempted to neglect your health because of the people around you. But you, not they, will suffer illness if you do. You may have been mistreated in the past and are greatly tempted to hate, to rebel, to refuse to forgive, to insist on your own way, but it will be *you* who will be miserable and at cross-purposes with others.

Transgression of God's laws is called *sin* (1 John 3:4). This word need not disturb us. It simply means that you have violated some divine principles of spiritual living, just as the word *sick* means you have disobeyed some medical rules of physical living. You may not have been aware of the rules, but the results of your transgression do not take into account your ignorance. Any amount of reassurance of your innocence will not change the results.

Why are people uneasy? Turn again to the Bible:

The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked" (Isa. 57:20-21).

The wicked flee when no man pursues; but the righteous are bold as a lion (Prov. 28:1).

He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy (Prov. 28:13).

Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek Your statutes (Ps. 119:155).

It is personal sin, or wickedness as the Bible often calls it, which causes a man his misery, not the unrighteousness of someone else.

We are no more free to chart our own course for mental health than we are to layout the road to physical health. No one condemns a man who gets sick because he unknowingly exposed himself to disease or was unaware that he had violated the rules

of good health. But we are less sympathetic and call him foolish if he deliberately risks sickness. No one would condemn a man because he was exposed to mean and hateful treatment. But deliberate violation of biblical principles is another matter.

There are degrees of wickedness. Obviously, to steal a nickel out of mother's purse is not the same as robbing a bank, but both are cut from the same cloth. For a child in a temper tantrum to hit his playmate on the head is not the same as a man having a grudge against an enemy and murdering him, but the spirit is the same. The high schooler who tells his parents he is going to the library to study, but who sneaks in a date with his girlfriend instead is not the same as the man who tells his wife he has an appointment and slips away to see another woman. But they are closely related.

DOING SOMETHING ABOUT SIN

Just as a slight cold is a warning that all is not well in the body, so unrighteousness, however slight, is a warning that all is not well with a person's morality. "Where envy and self-seeking exist," God says, "confusion and every evil thing will be there" (James 3:16). This is why such reactions within a man should be noted and taken care of. These reactions are *within* him, even though they were stimulated by some circumstance. They can lead to great evil.

We tend to ignore or excuse the inner life. God spoke through the Prophet Ezekiel, saying: "They come to you [Ezekiel] as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain" (Ezek. 33:31).

If your anxiety is due to your violation of a biblical principle, then this is good news. It is good news because you can do something about such a violation. You can confess your sin, acknowledge it before the Lord, look at it the same way He looks at it—with hatred and disdain. David admitted his sin before God and asked for cleansing from it: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions... Create in me a clean heart, O God... Restore to me the joy of Your salvation" (Ps. 51:23a, 10a, 12a).

You cannot erase the past. You cannot decide what your marriage partner will do. You cannot control the conduct of your associates or the turn of world events. But you can do something about your sin, which cuts you off from personal inner peace.

This is indeed good news. It is not someone else's wrongs toward you that cause your anxieties and tensions. It is your own sin. And you can do something about it by coming just as you are to God for His forgiveness and cleansing.

The choice is yours.

Questions for review:

1. What was Jerome Weller's key to finding peace?
2. To forgive is a mark of _____.
3. This is the essence of good mental health: _____
_____.
4. An unhappy person must come to terms with the people in his past, forgive them, and seek to understand the effect they have had on him. But Romans 2:1 says he has no grounds for _____
_____.
5. Why should unrighteous and sinful reactions within a man be noted and taken care of?

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