



From Coping to Cure

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

LESSON 3: MOST OF US HAVE HAD A POOR START IN LIFE!

THOUGHT STARTER:

Why do people blame their present behavior on their past experiences?

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and Power.

Colossians 2:8-10, NKJV

Malcolm and Dorothy sit, stone faced, across from the counselor in the consulting room, with an invisible wall between them. They are very busy Christians who have been married for twenty-two miserable years.

She says that he does not treat her like a doormat, but like the dirt under a doormat! She would do anything in the world for him, she says: "If only he would show some appreciation and give me just a little bit of affection and tenderness. But no, he just takes me for granted. All he wants is for me to wash his clothes, cook his meals, and keep the house. He is a very proud, selfish, bad-tempered man given to very loud yelling."

To show how inconsiderate he is, she told how he bought her the Lincoln she drives when he knew perfectly well that she wanted a Cadillac. She must even beg him for a meager allowance. But today, the counselor looks at a well groomed, elegantly dressed lady and observes that underneath the expensive clothing is a very hostile, bitter woman.

They live in a large, professionally decorated, color coordinated, beautifully furnished and landscaped house. They could not wish for a better air-conditioned place in which to carry on their bitter relationship. Their two children live on the opposite side of the country and as far away from their parents as they could get. The maid does her best to avoid getting chewed out by either one of them.

Malcolm sits there shaking his head, teeth clenched, as he listens to her side of the

story. When it is his turn he describes her as a spoiled, selfish, demanding person. From the start of their marriage everything had to go her way, from keeping the house, to when they ate, choosing friends and activities, raising the children, choosing their clothes, and on and on. He finally gave up on her and concentrated on developing his business. He let her run the house and the family. He had his territory; she had hers. Their buffer zone was the children.

Now the children are gone and all that is left between them is mutual hostility and strong differences of opinion.

Malcolm had been raised in a lower class European family where the father called all the shots and the women followed instructions. His father had a violent temper and would abuse the family verbally and sometimes physically. Malcolm is much like his father, except he never physically abused anyone. He admits to being self-centered.

Dorothy grew up in an upper middle-class home. She had very few limits, was quite self-centered, and often pouted when she couldn't have her way. She could be called a spoiled child. Her parents provided a stable home and her mother tended to dominate the family.

Obviously there is more to each of their histories. But at this point she will only admit to being a misunderstood lady and this brings great frustration to her.

When this couple began to seek help, they could have turned to a counselor with either a humanist or a biblical perspective. The two approaches would be quite different.

BLAME YOUR BACKGROUND

The study of how humans affect or help one another is humanism.

Webster's dictionary defines humanism as:

A doctrine, set of attitudes, a way of life centered upon human interests or values; a philosophy that rejects supernaturalism, regards man as a natural object, and asserts the essential dignity and worth of man and his capacity to achieve self-realization through the use of reason and scientific method.

Although the name is current, humanism, as a philosophy of life, is nothing new. Rejecting God and centering a way of life and a way of thinking around man's interests and values has been around since the beginning of time.

In graduate school, my professors identified a rather predictable response caused by growing up in a restrictive environment. They identified a poor start in life as one that hinders self-expression, frustrates pleasure needs, and provides wrong reinforcers.

They taught that the consequences of growing up in this type of environment are adults who will respond to the circumstances of life with the following ways: hostility, resentment, hate, pessimism, fear, doubt, perplexity, conflict, confusion, pain, depression, indifference, cruelty, lack of generosity, rage, oppression of others.

Time magazine featured an article entitled "The Burnout of Almost Everyone":

They describe the stages of burnout, progressing from intense enthusiasm and job satisfaction, to exhaustion, physical illness, acute anger and depression.

Even the best worker, when thwarted, will swallow his rage; it then turns into a small private conflagration, an internal fire in his engine room.¹

According to these authors, the consequence to adults of being thwarted (i.e., not getting their own way) by other adults (i.e., husbands and wives) are *rage and hostility*, resulting in physical illness, depression, and tension headaches.

No doubt people who struggle with the responses listed above do come from faulty family backgrounds, unloving relationships, difficult experiences, and situations in which there was little opportunity given to express themselves.

Furthermore, given proper alteration in the people, circumstances, and social conditions that surround an individual, changes can occur without giving God a thought. Or counseling, done by trained, caring, kindly people, and followed up by appropriate changes, can bring great relief to an anxious, confused person. If you want relief, you can find it in this wonderful world. Who needs God?

A change of location or the removal of a troublesome person can give relief to an anxious person. That is relief, not healing. Alcohol can quiet a hostile, bitter heart, but it only gives relief, not healing.

If the couple we described at the beginning of this chapter would turn to a humanist counselor for help, the counselor would develop a detailed study of their backgrounds, their stormy marriage, and their response to each other at present. From this information, the counselor would help them understand how their backgrounds have shaped their outlook on life, what their needs are, what ways they are frustrating each other's needs, and what adjustments can be made in order to satisfy each other's needs.

Hopefully, as Dorothy gains some understanding of both her needs and Malcolm's, and senses that he is making adjustments with her needs in mind, her anger and bitterness will be calmed and she will experience some peace of mind, become more hopeful, more affectionate, and more desirous of meeting his needs.

As Malcolm gains some understanding of his and Dorothy's needs, makes some adjustments on her behalf, and senses that she is seeking to meet his needs, his

quarrelsomeness and hot temper will cool. They can then develop a friendship and discover the joy of living as he works to meet her needs.

Just imagine how relieved these people would be if the counselor could help them in this way.

I emphasize that they can find blessed relief by following this approach, but not a change of heart.

What causes change as a result of relief? We could compare this change to the relief experienced if you take a pain pill. Change happens swiftly. You get relief but not healing. Isn't it good to get relief? Of course, as long as you don't kid yourself and you understand it is relief and not healing.

Recently I learned a lesson about the quick, comforting effect of drugs. I had a tooth pulled and it developed what my dentist called a "dry socket." My jaw became infected and it spread to the side of my face so that at any one moment I experienced incredible, unbearable pain around my eye, ear, sinuses, jaw, and throat. The pain was so intense that I was ready to do anything for some relief!

My dentist handed me an envelope containing some little pills. After swallowing one, the pain gradually disappeared. To maintain freedom from pain, all I had to do was keep swallowing those pills.

Everyone knows that pain pills do not cure the source of the pain. Healing must also happen. So I knew that the condition of my jaw had not changed. But that didn't matter. I would have paid any price for those pills. (This incident was a clear lesson to me of how easily anyone can become dependent on pills for a sense of well-being.) Having one's needs met, similarly, brings relief, not healing.

Our couple could seek out a Christian who is trained in humanistic counseling, who would proceed in the same methods as the humanistic counselor. They could seek out a biblical counselor, who would also recognize that the woman's anger, her bitter response to her husband, and his quarrelsomeness and nasty temper were barriers to a healthy marriage. The humanist would say these responses are socially caused. The Bible-based counselor would call them sin.

BLAME SIN

Finding relief from sin instead of obtaining cleansing is a cruel trap. Like my situation with the pain pill, I am comfortably sick. Relief from sin allows me to be comfortably separated from God.

A follower of Jesus takes the subject of *sin* seriously. We do indeed face very serious social problems. If it is sin that is the cause, there couldn't be any better news: *There is*

a cure for sin.

Many years ago, I contracted malaria; I alternately perspired and shivered, my joints ached, and I struggled with a high fever. One of the missionaries said, "It's only malaria. Take these pills and go to bed. Tomorrow you will be better." Sure enough, it worked.

Several years later my wife and her friend, who traveled with us in a part of Africa, became very ill after we returned home to the United States. They had the same malaria symptoms that I had previously, and they tried to tell their doctor what it was. He wouldn't listen, hospitalized them, and subjected them to a variety of tests and x-rays. In the meantime, they both suffered with high fever, chills, and pain. Three days later, the doctor consulted a tropical medicine specialist who diagnosed malaria. He prescribed the same pills I had taken and in one day they were better. They went through five days of unnecessary suffering because the doctor didn't know what to treat.

Dealing with sin is like that. The cure is swift and sure if you use the proper diagnosis and proper treatment. You can suffer greatly from the ravages of sin while you are sincerely and carefully trying to correct the suffering by following the wrong diagnosis and the wrong treatment.

In the case of my wife and her friend, the doctor had never seen malaria and therefore tried to find a cause familiar to him.

The same can happen when one deals with symptoms the Bible calls sin. There is no debate about the symptoms; everyone agrees on what they are. What is debatable is the cause.

The Bible says contention and outbursts of anger are works of the flesh or sin. If one or both people in a disagreement accept this diagnosis, they will turn Godward, confess their sins, repent, and receive forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal.

If they reject the diagnosis as sin and believe the very same symptoms are socially or culturally caused, they will proceed to investigate exposure to family, friends, church, community, etc., for an explanation.

Dr. S. I. McMillen, a long-time friend of mine, spent many years studying the biblical principles and directions on living in Jewish and Christian writings. As a result of this research he wrote a bestseller called *None of These Diseases*, which describes the physical consequences of wrong living. He pointed out that there may be sin in the picture when aches and pains show up:

Peace does not come in capsules! This is regrettable because medical science recognizes that emotions such as fear, sorrow, envy, resentment, and hatred are responsible for the majority of our sicknesses. Estimates vary from 60 percent to nearly 100 percent. Emotional stress can cause

high blood pressure, toxic goiter, migraine headaches, arthritis, apoplexy, heart trouble, gastrointestinal ulcers, and other serious diseases too numerous to mention.

As physicians we can prescribe medicine for the symptoms of these diseases, but we cannot do much for the underlying cause—emotional turmoil. It is lamentable that peace does not come in capsules. We need something more than a pill for the disease-producing stresses of the man who has lost his life savings, the tearful feminine soul who has been jilted, the young father who has inoperable cancer, the woman whose husband is a philanderer, the distraught teenager with a facial birthmark, and the schemer who lies awake at night trying to think of ways to get even with his neighbor. . No one can appreciate so fully as a doctor the amazingly large percentage of human disease and suffering which is directly traceable to worry fear, conflict, immorality, dissipation, and ignorance—to unwholesome thinking and unclean living. The sincere acceptance of the principles and teachings of Christ with respect to the life of mental peace and joy, the life of unselfish thought and clean living, would at once wipe out more than half the difficulties, diseases, and sorrow, of the human race.²

A Christian with a biblical perspective and a Christian with a humanistic perspective can both be sincere, committed people who are looking at the same situation, but they will come up with different causes and different solutions.

Alexander Pope described how sin captures us:

Vice is a monster of so frightful mean,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

Humanistic thinking can be like that. First, we study it in order to understand it. Then we shake our heads in disagreement, then listen some more to be sure we heard correctly, and finally, unknowingly begin to absorb it.

If you are dealing with sin, you must turn to the creator and savior for cleansing, strengthening, and changing. If it is sin, society didn't put it into you; society only stirs up what is already in you. If it is sin, society can't help you. It requires a supernatural cure.

If you want relief, you can find it in this world. If you want a cure, only God can help you. As Tournier says, there is no human cure for sin.

The couple in this lesson became my clients. They had been to three counselors before coming to "last-resort Brandt." One counselor was a humanist and not a Christian, and

the other two were "Christian humanists." The counselors had actually worked with the couple individually and had gone into a detailed study of both their backgrounds, reviewing their twenty-year history of antagonism and discord. The couple came away from the counselors with the verdict that they had irreconcilable differences and divorce was the only solution.

But during the time with each previous counselor, the woman had come away from each session greatly relieved. She was appreciative of their understanding, kindness, and willingness to listen to her. She felt that they understood she was ready to change, but that her husband wouldn't cooperate. She felt that the counselors understood why she was bitter and hostile under the circumstances with which she had to live.

The husband was very disgusted with the whole process. He tolerated going only for the sake of the marriage. In his opinion, they just sided with her and did not really grasp what a problem she had created for him in their marriage. So, as a result, she was helped in finding great relief for herself, but the marriage was actually worse.

It was immediately evident to me that she had two problems: first, a personal problem of sin in the areas of anger and bitterness and second, the marriage.

He had two problems also: first, the personal problem of sin in the areas of quarrelsomeness and a nasty temper and second, the marriage.

They turned to God for their solution and in six weeks they were behaving like honeymooners! Interestingly, I never did talk to them about their marriage.

I am not trying to say that their marriage problems evaporated. Normally, newlyweds would not have a smooth marriage either. They had many details to work out as they started their new life. What I am saying is that they now approached their problems without hostility, quarreling, and yelling as they allowed the Lord to give them peaceful, loving, and joyful hearts. At that point they didn't need me and were quite capable of approaching their marriage problems in a friendly fashion and began to solve them.

This is the Christian miracle of the cleansed life.

Examine yourself. Are you a Christian who turns to God for help? Are you a Christian and a partial humanist who turns to the environment for relief from sin? Are you a humanist who accepts scientific investigation only and rejects the biblical record?

Here is God's promise again:

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:11-13, NIV)

If we have a plan for our life and God says He has a plan for our life, whose plan is better?

Lesson: *My environment can give me relief from sin; only the Lord can cure it.*

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
- Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
- What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?

1. Why do people blame their present behavior on their past experiences?
2. How would you define *humanism*?
3. Give examples of how people can help others obtain relief.
4. What does it mean to be "complete in Him"?
5. What is wrong with relief?
6. How can Dorothy and Malcolm develop a satisfying relationship?

¹ *Time*, Beninga and Spradley, "The Burnout of Almost Everyone," September 21, 1981, 84.

² McMillen, S. I., M.D., *None of These Diseases* (Waco, TX: Word, n.d.), 64-65.

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