

2 More Steps to Overcoming Powerlessness

Last week we looked at Steps 1 and 2 to overcoming powerlessness: “Do the Work of Repentance” and “Start the Messy Cleanup.” In case you missed it, read it here. Today we’ll take a look at Steps 3 and 4.

Step 3: Think Differently

There are a lot of situations in life that seem hard to overcome because of the level of bravery it takes to actually acknowledge there is a problem. We have all met people with the proverbial pet elephant standing in their living room. These people are oblivious to the elephant—their internal world—but usually are quick to point out the elephant standing in other people’s living rooms.

Vampire Victims

To change the metaphor a bit, these people are vampire victims! The victim mentality is one of the deadliest mindsets, because a victim is totally incapable of changing his or her environment. Victims spend massive amounts of time sucking the life out of everyone else because they live in a powerless state of mind. Victims believe that their external world has to change in order for them to be OK. Because a victim is so out of control internally, he or she feels an enormous need to control everyone else.

Powerlessness is the process of giving away ownership and empowering someone or something else as your sole decision maker. You cannot fix something for which you are unwilling to take ownership. It’s simply impossible. Taking ownership for your decisions and your problems is the only way to ever become a healthy person. Regardless of what you have come to believe, you are responsible for your own life and actions.

When you give up that right to someone else, you have rendered yourself powerless.

Meet Jim and Sarah

Recently, I counseled a couple that typified the victim mentality. Their cry for help came in the form of a Facebook chat. I sat down with my friend Jim and began to assess what was going on. It didn't take him long to explain to me that his wife, Sarah, was impossible to please. She was a black hole that nothing could ever fill; and worse yet, she was a nag. She had no respect for his boundaries, especially when their discussions morphed into arguments. This usually resulted in Jim punching holes in the wall or smashing things.

"She won't let me leave the room or give me time to think; she just keeps hounding me," Jim complained. "Sarah totally controls me!"

My first thought was, Wowza! I'm so glad I'm not in this guy's shoes! After giving him time to talk and vent, I began to ask him some pointed questions about himself. First, I asked what he had done to work on his relationship with his wife.

There was a long pause accompanied with a sigh. "Um, I guess I'm here," he said.

"OK," I said. "Did you set up this meeting, or did Sarah?"

(I already knew the answer to this question, but I really wanted Jim to know the answer for himself.)

"Uh, she did," he admitted.

Continuing down that train of thought, I said, "Who have you gone to in order to get some help with your relationship?" Thinking for a second, Jim responded, "Well, I talk to my mom sometimes. Actually, my mom found out because Sarah called her. She normally calls my parents when we are hard at it."

Stuffing Pain

At this point, I was starting to see a pattern in Jim's life. As the questions continued, I found out that Jim didn't talk to anyone about his marriage, including his best friend. To make matters worse, when I asked him what he does to get rid of his pain and frustration, his response was, "I normally just try to forget about it." It wouldn't take a psychiatrist to figure out that Jim's plan of ignoring his frustration and stuffing his pain wasn't working! This man was punching holes in the wall and turning over tables in the house.

"Jim, it doesn't seem like your plan has been working very well," I said. "What have you done to meet your wife's love languages?" (I was referring to Dr. Gary Chapman's research on the five primary ways people express and interpret love—Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, Acts of Service and Physical Touch.)

Annoyed, Jim replied, "Even if I try, I don't ever seem to be able to meet them. I've felt really frustrated lately trying to meet Sarah's needs. It feels pretty hopeless." You could hear in his tone of voice the irritation he was carrying inside.

"Jim, what are you going to do about your marriage?"

"I don't know. I wish Sarah wasn't such a mess and so hard to live with," he said.

It was time for me to give some feedback. "Jim, it doesn't feel like she is really the whole problem. You have made her responsible for getting help for you guys. She is the one who is contacting your parents and me. You haven't done anything proactive to work on your relationship other than the things she hounds you about; and you have no process for dealing with the pain and frustration you feel from not being successful.

And finally, you still believe that she is the sole problem in

this relationship. I'm not surprised that she nags you, Jim. It's the only way that you have ever become motivated in this relationship. You have empowered her to be your mother."

Light Bulb Moment

I could see the light bulb exploding in his brain. For the first time in a long while, Jim was beginning to realize that he had given his power away to his wife. She had become responsible for the health of their relationship. As long as he kept this belief system, he would always be powerless to fix what was going on inside of him.

So many people are like Jim. They create a belief system that tells them they are not responsible for the condition of their own life. It is less painful to believe that their problems are everyone else's fault.

When I first talked with Jim, he had given up on his relationship. He told his wife that he was considering getting a divorce because she was making him miserable. What Jim didn't realize was that if he spent less time worrying about what Sarah was going to do and more time trying to figure out what he was going to do, he could actually fix a majority of his problems. However, Jim had never taken personal responsibility for his life and marriage, so he was always frustrated and overwhelmed because his peace and happiness were at the mercy of his wife.

Once Jim realized that he had given all of his power away, he was then able to repent for his victim mentality and figure out what he was going to do to get his power back and love his wife. Today, Jim is no longer a victim, and his marriage is flourishing!

I have always said that anytime a problem is 100 percent my fault, it's a good day! I can fix anything that is my fault, but I can't fix anything I don't control. The day that you take ownership for your life is the day that you begin to take

control again.

Step 4: Set Healthy Boundaries

One of the major aspects of being in control of your life is the ability to set healthy boundaries with people. Proverbs 25:28 says, "He who has no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down and without walls." The person who lacks the ability to set boundaries will end up being like a broken-down, pillaged city. A defenseless city gets plundered and has nothing of value left to offer anyone.

Personal boundaries are like the protective walls of an ancient city. The purpose of having good boundaries is to protect and nourish yourself so that you can cultivate healthy relationships with others. Without the ability to protect yourself, you have no way to provide protection for anyone else in your life. A person establishes healthy boundaries through the process of defining his or her virtues, values and needs, and then communicating them to the people that he or she is in relationship with.

When you articulate your boundaries to people, they have the opportunity to respect your needs and virtues and protect your relationship with them. And when they value and protect the things that are important to you, the relationship flourishes. This is the process that builds trust between you and others.

Another great aspect of boundaries is the ability to let people know what you can do/will do and can't do/won't do. You actually have the right and the ability to set limits with others for the health of the relationship. There are no healthy relationships without healthy boundaries.

One of the things we all need to keep in mind when we are setting boundaries is that the primary goal should be to build stronger and deeper relationships with people. Yes, boundaries do keep some people out of relationship with us when they refuse to respect those boundaries. But the main goal of

telling people what we need and feel is so they can do the things that cultivate a healthy relationship with us, not so that we have a valid reason to scratch them off of our friend list.

Powerful people know what they need and what they are going to do. They are able to set boundaries because they believe that no one else is responsible for them. No matter what the situation, they are still able to be powerful and choose their responses, because no one else but God is in control of their future.

Do you feel powerless? How has this series spoken to you? Tell me about it in the comments below.

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