

Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

Mountain Climbing, Hydration, and Habits

-by Dr. John P. Splinter

In a few moments I'll tell you about a potentially life-threatening event that took place on a mountain at 13,400 feet. It's a personal story and is a bit embarrassing to share. Before getting to that story, a few "building blocks" may be helpful. A couple of them come from the field of psychology. The main "building blocks" come from the Bible.

To gain preliminary working understanding of the main topic of this article, let's ponder a couple of thoughts about habit-formation. There are good habits and not-so-good habits. Let's take a ride around the latter's neighborhood and see what we see.

Three Stages Of Impure Habits

Habit formation of any kind is a form of "progressive behavior." For example, a person doesn't start out being a heroin addict. They may start on softer drugs, migrate to heroin use, and then progress into severe addiction. So let's study the subject of progressive behavior at a little more depth.

One way of understanding progressive behavior is to break it down into stages. Here are three stages outlining the development and sequential ownership of what we'll call "impure habits." Most people have at least one or two habits that they recognize as somewhat less than pure, or good, or perhaps healthy ~ but they do them anyway. So let's begin by looking at the progression of these habits. They can be seen as a three-stage progression.

Stage One ~ Adventure/dabbling ~ In the first stage we're cool, and we're just toying with the habit. In this stage we like the activity. We may consider it "pre-habit" or "just a small habit." Either way, we feel it's harmless and we feel we're pretty much in control. We may even think we're slick because we can get away with it. We may see ourselves as somehow "above" others who aren't into our habit. In this stage we may defend our "right" to the habit.

Stage Two ~ Love/hate ~ In this stage we are aware that it's definitely a habit, and somewhere in the second stage our habit morphs into a bit of a "love/hate" thing. Whereas in the first stage we "liked" the activity, in the second stage we begin to recognize we "need" the activity. Somehow this formerly harmless habit got stronger along the way. In the second stage we begin to be aware of the ownership this habit is gaining in our lives. We may have tried to

stop a few times. We may begin to recognize some of the damage it's doing in our characters and perhaps our relationships.

Stage Three ~ Addiction/weakness ~ In stage three our habit is now a dominant force in our lives. It has become an "addiction/weakness" thing. We now recognize we "crave" the habit and are incapable of stopping. We can't make it for very long without the habit. The habit has morphed again, and now we will do almost anything to have access to it, even though we recognize how weak it makes us. We recognize that our lives have become organized around getting our "fix," whatever that is. And as the habit has gotten stronger, it has taken us into darker places than we ever thought we'd go. We may hate the habit, but we feel powerless against it. Furthermore, anyone who tries to help us break our addiction, risks becoming our enemy.

Have you ever wondered why some people seem naturally, innately stronger against forming bad habits? One of the ground-level reasons has to do with the condition of the deepest part of their being ~ a part that we'll call the "soul." Some people are "set up" for moral struggles from the earliest days of their childhood. Let's look more deeply at this phenomenon.

How "Soul Pain" Often Sets The Stage For Impure Habits

Impure habits are often tied to soul pain. Soul pain is what happens in our deepest "selves" when our need for others gets twisted, rejected or crushed. In the field of psychology we talk about people who have "abandonment issues," or "abuse issues," or "attachment issues." When young human beings are not lovingly tended, when their basic human needs are not met, it causes pain in the deepest "self" ~ we'll call it the "soul." Here are a few examples of people who often carry soul pain.

- People who faced emotional deficits in childhood ~ for example, kids who had:
 - Work-a-holic parents who never had time for them.
 - Alcoholic parents whose addiction dominates the family system.
 - Drug abusing parents (illicit drugs or even OTC drugs).
 - Parents who divorced, especially if the divorce was bitter and fighting.
 - Parents with mental/nervous disorders.
 - Emotionally distant parents.
 - Emotionally abusive parents.
- People who as children were physically abused (e.g., beaten, starved, kicked, etc.).
- Or sexually abused (raped, fondled, coerced into sexual acts).
- Or emotionally traumatized.
- Or rejected by their parents.
- Children who experienced the premature death of a parent often carry soul pain.
- Children who grew up in single parent families (as I did), often carry soul pain.

Soul pain can be understood through the following metaphor. Imagine a beautiful sea anemone whose long tendrils reach outward into the azure ocean, waving to and fro with the ocean's currents. The tendrils are slender and beautiful. Those tendrils are like a child's soul as it reaches toward a parent, for love, nurturing, affirmation, support and protection. They are

connectors, helping the child emotionally attach ~ also helping the child understand the world and relationships.

Now imagine taking a blow-torch to the tendrils. The result is that the tendrils become gnarled, burned, blackened, shriveled, scarred and unable to feel. Those tendrils are like a child's soul after being deeply harmed by those who were supposed to provide love and nurture. Those damaged tendrils will cause the child to have a difficult time attaching to anyone. The tendrils are now painful. They are inadequate. They lead the child to turn inward rather than outward.

That's a picture of soul pain. Granted, the metaphor of a sea anemone is just a mental picture. But it's a valid explanation of adults who were damaged during childhood. Now these damaged kids become adults, and because of their damaged souls they are more susceptible to the false solutions offered by the Enemy of God.

However, soul pain is not *only* a product of psychological wounds done to us when we were children. A second source involves ourselves, wounding ourselves through willful disobedience to God. When we do things that are in opposition to what God asks us to do, we harm ourselves. This chapter started out with an analogy of a heroin addict. Each time the individual injects heroin into his veins, he's creating greater future problems for himself. There is an axiom worth memorizing: *Sin creates soul pain*. Soul pain is not just something that happened to us, at the hands of others. Soul pain is often the result of self-inflicted wounds that are directly linked to sinful decisions we make and sinful actions we do. There's a verse in Proverbs which, in the New American Standard version is translated, "***He who sins against me injures himself***" (*Prov. 8:36*).

Coping Mechanisms

To deal with this pain, people often develop what psychologists call, "coping mechanisms," to help them. Coping mechanisms are any sort of habitual behavior that is aimed at reducing the emotional pain or emptiness in the child's life. In today's culture, one of the most frequently used coping mechanism when dealing with soul pain, involves what psychologists call, "sexualizing one's anxiety." Here are three examples: ...