



HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE

*Hope and Healing for Yourself
and Your Relationships*

Sandra D. Wilson, Ph.D.

Hurt People Hurt People

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Unseen Wounds

“**H**ERE ARE FOUR simple words that I call ‘Wilson’s Law of Relationships.’”

I have spoken that sentence in scores of conferences and seminars across the country, and the audience response is similar wherever I go. People smile or chuckle as they scribble my grandiose title in their notes. Then they look up expectantly to learn what comes next.

I continue, “Wilson’s Law of Relationships says, ‘Hurt people hurt people.’”

Suddenly smiles droop. Chuckles stop. A hush settles over the audience as many nod their heads and glance knowingly at companions.

I can relate to their responses because I am one of those hurt people who has hurt people. In fact, almost everyone I know identifies with the notion that hurt people hurt people. However, I’ve noticed a curious phenomenon: even when we see the result of this hurting and hurtful pattern in ourselves and others, we resist the idea that unseen injuries are real.

As I’ve listened to others and searched my own heart, I’ve concluded that many of our struggles spring from a belief that adults—especially Christian adults—should be “beyond” or “above” being hurt.

Good Christians Are “Wound-proof”

“If I were really a strong Christian, this wouldn’t hurt so much. I just wish I could trust God more.”

I’ve heard words similar to those for years as I have counseled with Christian men and women. These dear people are judging their responses to a panorama of painful experiences, including job loss, betrayal by a mate, sexual abuse by a parent, and even the death of a parent, child, or spouse.

Some personalize the “this shouldn’t bother me” theme by adding something like, “My folks always told me I was too sensitive,” “My husband (or wife) tells me I’m just a crybaby,” or perhaps, “My pastor keeps encouraging me to have more faith.” But the basic refrain remains: “I should be able to take anything, no matter how cruel and crushing, without feeling any distress.” Reframed in “unseen wounds” terminology: “No matter how traumatic the event, I should not let it hurt me.”

Where do intelligent adults get the idea that any human being ought to be able to take everything without feeling anything?

A large part of the answer, I believe, is found in what I call binding shame.

Binding Shame

Have you ever felt as if you were the only caterpillar in a butterfly world? Do you often feel as if you have to do twice as much to be half as good as others? That’s binding shame.¹

Shame is the soul-deep belief that something is horribly wrong with me that is not wrong with anyone else in the entire world. If I am bound by shame, I feel hopelessly, disgustingly

different and worthless. I mean literally *worth less* than other people.

The shame I am describing has little or nothing to do with true moral guilt, or what we would call “biblical shame.” Scripture clearly states that each of us is utterly ruined by sin and completely guilty before God. No one can be more ruined than “utterly” nor more guilty than “completely.”

God sees each of us as being equally and helplessly bound in sin and deserving of the death penalty. And God invites each of us equally and lovingly to accept His free and gracious offer of salvation. From God’s perspective, no person or group of persons is disgustingly different or worth less than others.

So where did many of us—yes, me too—get a blatantly unbiblical concept of shame?

Somebody misled us when we were too young to read and understand the Bible or to accurately interpret the world around us. Actually, it was probably a whole lot of “somebodies” who likely believed the lie themselves. (Deceived deceivers are just as dangerous and hurtful—if not more so—than calculated deceivers.)

As I see it, shame is rooted in the lie that human beings can and should be perfect. And being perfect includes the “take anything” factor, (that is, endure any circumstance without feeling anything but “fine” and without behaving any way except “nice”).

But because I am unable to be unfailingly fine and nice, I know I am imperfect. And because I know I’m not perfect, I view myself as hideously flawed. So when I make a mistake, I don’t simply *make* a mistake, I believe that *I am* a mistake. That is shame’s lie in a nutshell. And that lie becomes the lens through which we see every experience.



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I don't understand why or how I got so hideously different; I just know that I've always been that way. It's like having an invisible, irreparable birth defect. So, of course, that means there is no chance to change—"that's just the way I am." Have you said that to yourself? Or perhaps you've heard it at a family gathering in words like, "Don't make such a big deal out of Grandma's sharp tongue; that's just the way she is." Or, "Don't pay any attention to Uncle Jeff's dirty jokes; that's just part of his personality."

When I am bound by shame, it contaminates all my perceptions, choices, and relationships. What's more, the "I'm different and worthless" perspective leaves me feeling isolated from everyone around me. I believe that my only chance to connect with perfect people is either to convince them that I can fill a need in their life or to trick them into thinking that I too am perfect.

The relationship between binding shame and unseen wounds involves a curious malady: inner blindness. In other words, shame not only *binds* us, it also *blinds* us—as I know only too well.

My Bout with Binding, Blinding Shame

When my mother married my father she did not know that he was a bigamist and an embezzler, but he was. When he

learned that my mother was pregnant with me, he tried repeatedly to prevent my birth by insisting that my mother abort me. When she refused, he tried to induce a miscarriage. When that failed, he tried several times to kill her (and me) in what would look like a gun-cleaning accident. Before he could succeed, God intervened, and federal authorities caught up with him and put him in prison.

Consequently, I've never met, seen, spoken to, viewed a photo of, or seen even a scrap of handwriting from my biological father.

Decades before single motherhood became fashionable, my mother had a fatherless infant to care for in a place thousands of miles from family and friends.

At the hospital where I was born and where she worked as a physical therapist, rumors spread about my illegitimacy. Shortly before my mother's death in 1990, I got a deeper understanding of her shame and humiliation when she told me about putting her marriage license on the main hospital bulletin board to silence the rumors.

Two years later she married the alcoholic stepfather I believed was my birth father until Mother told me differently when I was ten. She divorced him three years later when his alcohol-related violence escalated to life-threatening levels.

I'm still missing chunks of my chaotic childhood. For nearly three decades, I erased the horror and humiliation of sexual molestation at the hands of a stranger, family "friends," and, the worst, a step-uncle.

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**We all read
and interpret the
Bible through
the defective lens
of personal**

How could those and many other awful experiences occur when I had an intelligent, well-educated, hard-working mom who loved me very much and loved God even more?

Perhaps part of the answer is that my mother herself was deeply wounded by shame. Her unseen wounds showed up most clearly in an inability to have a healthy, mutually respectful romantic relationship, resulting in five marriages to four husbands.

experience. Living the Shame

Alcoholic families are fertile seedbeds for shame. As the oldest child and “hero,” I tried to fix the family and make my mother happy by being a good—no, make that perfect—child. Naturally, I failed. Naturally, too, I blamed myself for not being good enough to do the impossible.

In addition, my shame-bound mother looked to her children to mend her tattered self-concept. As a result, she conveyed to us that achievements which reflected well on her were what made us valuable. This early emphasis launched me into a lifetime of perfectionistic performance and other people-pleasing behaviors to earn approval and love.

How did I cope as an imperfect and hurting person who believed I should be perfect? I became a self-protective perfectionist, approval addict, clueless as to what was going on inside me. For the shame that was binding me also was blinding me.

Unbiblical shame comes bound with a kind of “existence

guilt” when we believe that only perfect people deserve life and happiness. To see and acknowledge personal imperfections seems life threatening, so we just close our eyes to them. We are afraid to risk the honest self-examination necessary for integrity and wholeness. At least, that’s how I functioned most of my life.

All of this was true even though I loved God and believed in Him. However, *what* I believed about God added to my heavy load of shame instead of lifting it.

A God Who Cares about Our Inner Lives

Like many other sincere but shame-shackled Christians, I had distorted the God of the Bible from being the God who “looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7) into a god who looks at outward appearance. After all, serving a deity who focuses on the external observance of religious rituals seems appealingly familiar and “doable” to those of us already caught up in performance-based living.

Whether we realize it or not, we all read and interpret the Bible through the defective lens of personal experience. Not surprisingly, the deity we “see” has views that are amazingly similar to our own!

I pulled off that convenient and comforting theological sleight-of-hand for most of my faith life. However, God kept insisting that I get to know Him as He really is, and then allow Him to be Himself.

God places a very high value on truth.

God places a very high value on truth. Jesus called Himself truth (John 14:6).



Jesus, for example, called Himself truth (John 14:6). And unlike humans who typically emphasize externals, God focuses primarily on our unseen, inner lives, or, as Scripture usually terms it, our “hearts.” Proverbs 4:23 tells us to “watch over” or “guard” our hearts because our external lives flow out of our internal selves—our “hearts.” Jesus echoed this concept when He declared that all our visible behaviors spill out of our unseen inner lives—again, our “hearts” (see Mark 7:21).

So it’s no surprise that the God of truth who looks primarily at our hearts calls us to live in total truth—truth inside, which only He sees, and truth outside, which others see. Yet many believers are unfamiliar with God’s desires for us to have “truth in [our] innermost beings” (Psalm 51:6).

Consider this: God tells Christians to “examine” themselves before they participate in the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28). As I understand this process, it includes looking inwardly at the condition of our “hearts” as truthfully as possible, and then looking to Jesus in faith to forgive the sin we discover.

Prolonged unforgiveness, murderous rage, and adulterous thoughts are examples of sins we might find during an inner examination. These are just a few of the hurtful ways we respond to unseen emotional and relational wounds. But we are unlikely to let God give us wisdom in the “hidden parts” when we believe He wants us to keep ignoring that “inside stuff.”

If we were to follow that line of reasoning we would come to the conclusion that God sanctions, indeed almost sanctifies, “anointed amnesia,” more commonly known as denial of reality. However, I believe that God is calling us out of dark, dank caves of denial into the honest risk of truth’s light.

Scripture says that we will not “prosper” if we conceal our sins instead of admit them and seek forgiveness (Proverbs

28:13). Perhaps the same principle applies to inner wounds when we continue to hide them rather than seek healing.

When we hide from painful truths, we deprive ourselves of discovering that Jesus, the Great Physician, is as able to heal our unseen wounds as He is to forgive our sins.

Pause to Ponder and Pray

Ponder

Read some or all of the following verses in more than one translation of the Bible. You will discover that God cares a lot more about our inner selves and our hidden wounds than most of us realize. Clearly, God calls us to greater self-awareness so that we can relinquish the defensive self-absorption that often marks the lives of us hurt people.

- ☛ Proverbs 4:23. Compare with Mark 7:21. Note that the “heart” (thoughts, will, etc.) is the source of everything others see and know about us.
- ☛ 1 Samuel 16:7. Note that God looks on our hearts. In effect, God goes to the source of who we are.
- ☛ Psalm 51:6. God wants us to have truth at the source. He promises to give us wisdom in the inner parts—the parts that are hidden from our awareness.

Pray

Lord, it's scary to think about leaving familiar hiding places. Help me to love truthful self-awareness more than fearful self-absorption. And please help me know the difference. Make me willing to commit to you my thoughts, feelings, and memories. Amen.