

GETTING H.E.L.P.

Recoverers (Part 3) | Ecc 4:9-12; Matt 5:3; Eph 4:22-29; Gal 6:2

Whoever you are... whatever your age... wherever you live... however you've managed in life thus far, it is likely that you have unreached potential. You could live an even more peaceful and joyful life. You could enjoy even deeper connections with God and other people. You could make an even greater contribution to this world. This possibility is something of what Jesus was pointing to when he said: **I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10).**

My experience of the people who come to Christ Church and live in the communities around our campuses is that they are unusually thoughtful people – eager to make the most of life. This is why I am inviting you to join me in days ahead in a newfound commitment to **GET H.E.L.P.** in advancing the quality of life most of us seek for ourselves and our families. You will notice the dots between the letter of the word HELP. As we reflect together today, I'd like to offer you FOUR KEY COMPONENTS of a strategy for moving toward our God-given potential, each corresponding to one of the letters in that word, HELP.

If we want to reach our full potential, the first important movement any of us can make is toward greater **HONESTY** about what may be tripping us up. Over the past few weeks, we've talked openly about how the SIN in other people and in ourselves shows up. Sin is a spiritual disease that results from loss of our relationship with God, our creator. When we are separated from God, we become subject to injuring others and having our lives disfigured by our HURTS. To deal with the not-rightness of our internal lives and the pressures imposed by the not-rightness of the world around us, many of us develop a variety of bad HABITS – compulsivity, addictions, and well-grooved patterns of relational dysfunction that aren't helpful to us or the people around us. Add to this a variety of HANGUPS I listed in the first episode of this series – things like perfectionism, toxic guilt and shame, co-dependency, excessive worry, anger or bitterness -- and life as we know it comes into focus.

Who do you know whose life is dominated and limited in one or more of these ways? I can think of people I love deeply whose personal lives and relational influence has been severely damaged by the fact that they haven't HONESTLY confronted these realities. Where are hurts, habits, or hangups affecting me or you?

As we explored last week, in the midst of all this, God comes to us with his PRESENCE, offering to wrap tightly around us the SECURITY and HOPE we need to face these realities and move forward constructively. Personally, my own growth as a human being has flowed from those moments when I clearly saw how much I needed **EMPOWERMENT** – when I realized that I couldn't seem to substantially improve my condition without the deep security and enduring hope found only in a trusting relationship with God. I'm struck by how Pastor Bryan Wilkerson describes this pattern.

“[Most of us] don't like to admit that we need anybody. Deep down inside, we all want to do it ourselves—to be independent and self-sufficient...” How long does it take “before a child starts saying, ‘I can do it myself.’” Theologically speaking, “self-reliance is the signature sin of the human race. Adam and Eve ate of the [forbidden fruit] because they thought it would make them like God, and they liked that idea. Admitting that we're needy and dependent [creatures] doesn't come easily to human beings in general, and it certainly doesn't come easily to well-fed, well-educated, upwardly mobile North Americans... We're a ‘can-do’ nation. If you can dream it, you can do it; you just have to believe in yourself. [In this country], self-improvement is a [multi-]billion-dollar industry.”¹

But Jesus says: **Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3)**. Blessed are those who know that they need my Heavenly Father's power to overcome the hurts, habits and hangups that drag them down. Blessed are those who ask God for his HELP to make life all that it can be. Are you at that point? Have you moved beyond viewing God as a silent observer of your life or an occasional consultant you go to in an emergency? Do you recognize that you are POWERLESS to build the most abundant life without him?

When I met Jeff, the young man I told you about last week, he was at that turning point. You may recall that Jeff grew up in one of the beautiful communities around here and was gifted with good looks and charm. But his childhood and teenage years had left him with a lot of hurts. Jeff had compensated for them with a variety of bad habits and addictions. He'd developed a lot of emotional survival strategies and distorted patterns of thinking that had become serious hangups. Eventually, Jeff wound up in prison for several years and, upon release, found his way to this church.

By the time I got to really know him, Jeff had honestly named a lot of what was broken and not working in his life and had started looking to God for the power to change these things. I shared with Jeff the story of the man who woke up one morning and said to God: Dear Lord: I want to thank you for being close to me so far this day. With your help I haven't been impatient, lost my temper, been grumpy, judgmental, or envious of anyone. But I will be getting out of bed in a minute, and then I think I will really need your HELP. Amen. Jeff laughed when he heard that and said, “That's ME. I really need God's help.” And I really wanted to help him find God's power.

In the months to come, Jeff and I would do breakfast and lunch together often. He started to absorb the idea that God's loving presence with him offered him a SECURITY and HOPE he'd never had before and he increasingly trusted that God's power could change his life for good. At that point I started to work with Jeff on an approach to personal change I call **LEAVING & LATCHING**. The big idea is that change happens for us as we leave behind a faulty or destructive pattern of thinking or behavior and latch onto a new and better pattern that takes its place. This shift is sometimes called the Replacement Principle of personal growth.

We meet this idea a lot in the New Testament where the Apostle Paul often tells us to “put off” one familiar action or attribute and to put on another. **You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires... and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22-24).**

To paraphrase noted Bible Study writer, Josh Hunt: The Apostle Paul tells the Roman Christians to **“overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21)**. He doesn’t say to overcome evil by sitting around musing on how much you would like to do that forbidden thing and trying not to do it. That like me saying to you: Think of a really fattening dessert. Have you got an image in mind? Now, don’t think about that anymore. How helpful is that? Now, think about someone you’d enjoy having a meal with. Think of their face across the table. Now, are you still thinking of dessert?

Paul says: Overcome evil with good. This is the principle of replacement. If you want to truly rise to your full potential, then you must put off the old and put on the new. You can’t just put on the new over the old. Why? Because the old hurts, habits and hangups will eventually seep through like old paint. Conversely, we can’t just put off the old without replacing it with the new. Why? Because nature abhors a vacuum.

To make this point, Jesus tells the story in Matthew 12 of a demon-possessed person whose evil spirit was cast out. When the demon couldn’t find a new residence, it came back and found its previous house (the original person) swept clean and hollow. So the evil spirit goes off, rounds up seven of his demon pals and they ALL move back into the person. Jesus concludes: **“And the final condition of that person is worse than the first” (Mat 12:45b)**. Josh Hunt observes: Had the person filled his life with other things, the demon would not have come back.

So Paul goes on in Ephesians 4: **Do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs (Ephesians 4:25-29)**. You see the pattern here? Leave the old and latch onto the new. Replace stealing with honest work and generosity. Replace unwholesome talk with helpful talk. Replace bad thinking with good thinking. ²

A lot of my time with Jeff was spent trying to help him leave old patterns of thinking and acting and latching onto more constructive ones. Jeff worked on replacing thoughts of where he’d failed with planning for what he might build. He replaced dwelling on cravings for substances with reading scripture and going for walks. Bit by bit, the old hurts, habits and hangups in so many areas of Jeff’s life began to melt away. I helped Jeff get a job and in time he became the leading salesperson at his company. It wasn’t a straight line to healing. At one point, he fell off the wagon and went into a residential recovery program. We talked often on the phone during those

weeks. He got a woman pregnant but resolved that he would marry her and they'd raise the child together. With each setback, he came back and got back on the beam.

Early on, I had introduced Jeff to a small group of other men that met on Fridays for Bible study and Jeff would tell me how much he was strengthened by the conversations that took place in that group. No surprise. If I had to name the fourth key component in a strategy for rising to your potential above any hurt, habit, or hangup, I would say it's all about the PEOPLE with whom you choose to spend time and the level of trust, transparency and truth you can establish there.

The Bible talks a lot about this theme. In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes we read: **Two are better than one... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (Eccles 4:9-12)**. The New Testament Epistles are jammed with instructions to Christians to meet and bond with each other for mutual support and growth. **Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed (Jas 5:16). Therefore encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thes. 5:11). Encourage one another daily... so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness (Heb 3:13). Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom (Col 3:16). Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2).**

Early on in his time at Christ Church, my friend Jeff found such help in the company of other people. He met one-on-one with me. He attended a small group. He was a regular part of our worshipping community. Jeff was both receiving for himself and giving to others the blessings of the "one anothers" described in the New Testament's vision of relationships. And then he started making a lot of money. He got very busy. He started hanging around with people who were a destructive influence on him. And one of those people swindled him and took most of Jeff's savings.

I'd not seen him in a long time, but for a moment he reached out to me. He came once to our small group. But then he withdrew and didn't return my texts. Three weeks later I got a call from someone at his workplace. "Pastor, I know that you and your church are very important to Jeff but he hasn't shown up at work for the past three days. Would you know where he's gone?" My blood ran cold and the breath left my body. And I said: "Call the police and send them to his home."

Jeff had so much going for him. He'd demonstrated HONESTY about what was dragging him down. He'd sought God's EMPOWERMENT to rise to his full potential. He'd been making such incredible progress on LEAVING the old ideas and patterns and LATCHING onto the new. But when he needed PEOPLE most... when it was most important that he lean on them even more... Jeff tried to go it alone... The old hurts, habits, and hangups moved back into the house of his heart. And a drug overdose stole him from us all.

It didn't have to be that way for Jeff. It doesn't have to be that way for anyone – including YOU. God's grace is greater than the gravity of life. You can find the security and hope and HELP you need to lift you above the hold of whatever weighs you down. Maybe it's time for you to make an appointment with one of our pastors or a Christian counselor. Perhaps God's prompting you to join a small group in the life of this church. In September, we're opening an amazing fellowship called CELEBRATE RECOVERY that's for those seeking freedom from hurts, habits or hang-ups of any kind. Grab one of the CR cards or visit the Connection center outside. CR could change your life.

Long ago, a certain monarch had twin sons. Calling them to his council chamber one day, he said, "My sons, the day will come when one of you must succeed me as king. The burdens of sovereignty are very heavy. To find out which of you is better able to bear them cheerfully, I am sending you together to a far corner of the kingdom. One of my advisors there will place equal burdens on your shoulders. My crown will one day go to the one who first returns bearing his burden like a king should."

So, the brothers set out together. Soon they overtook an aged woman struggling under a burden that seemed far too heavy for her frail body. One of the boys suggested that they stop to help her. The other protested: "We have a burden of our own to worry about. Let us be on our way." The objector hurried on while the other stayed behind to give aid. Along the road, from day to day, he found others who also needed help. A blind man took him miles out of his way. A lame woman slowed him to a halting walk.

Eventually he reached his father's advisor, where he secured his own burden on his shoulders and made his way home. When he arrived at the palace, his brother greeted him with dismay. He said, "I don't understand. I told our father the burden was too heavy to carry. However, did you do it?" The future king replied, "I suppose when I helped others carry their burdens, I found the strength to carry my own."

This is the secret the most faithful followers of Jesus know. When we HELP each other through life, everyone wins. So be honest about what's going on with you. Seek in prayer the divine empowerment God wants to give you. Leave something behind this week and latch onto something healthier. And let's all be for one another the Jesus people who make the burdens of life lighter for others. Let's be RECOVERERS.

¹ Bryan Wilkerson, "Desperate Hearts," Preaching Today.com

² <https://www.joshhunt.com/2016/10/31/the-principle-of-replacement/#:~:text=The%20Bible%20says%2C%20%20Overcome%20evil,is%20the%20principle%20of%20replacem ent.>