

Losing To Gain By Steven Harper

My wife and I have recently gone through classes for foster parenting, and I learned something there that I believe would be helpful to us when we are teaching the lost. In one of the classes, we covered what was called 'The Five Stages of Grief' [as compiled by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross] and how it applied to those foster children who may come into our home. In those five steps, I saw reactions that I have seen in numerous Bible studies with others throughout the years, and I began to consider if it might be helpful to consider these five steps in light of our studies with others that we might be better prepared to help them get to the point of obedience.

In a very real sense, those who come to know the truth have to go through a sort of grieving process, whether it is for the recognition of their own spiritual condition or the recognition of the fact of what they have been told all their lives is not true. It is often not pleasant to learn the truth! Knowing this and using this is not a guarantee, of course, that one will eventually obey, but it may help us see where they are and what hinders them from taking that final step of obedience. Let us consider each of these five steps and what we can do to help them move past the "grieving" and onto obedience and forgiveness.

Denial or Isolation. Many of us who have arranged to study with others have had the studies ended on this point. How many times have you seen this?—You sit down with an open Bible and, through the course of the study, the individual discovers that what they have known and believed and practiced for years does not match with Scripture and they begin denying that such is not really the case when it is obvious that it is the case.

King Saul was expert in denial when Samuel came to him and pointed out his failure to obey. Even with the noise of lowing cattle and bleating sheep, Saul still claimed, "But I have obeyed the voice of the Lord" (1st Sam. 15:13). The reality was quite different, but he still tried to deny the truth.

Unfortunately, this is where most Bible studies end because it is simply easier for some to deny the reality of their condition than to admit the truth and move on. It is difficult — and let us recognize that — for many people to hear that what they have believed is not the truth, and that they are still spiritually lost. Keep it in mind, and help them to face the truth. Gently, but firmly, remind them what the Scriptures teach and that denial will not change things. Make sure they know that you care for their souls and that the best thing to do is not deny, but to obey that they might be saved.

Anger. Others, upon hearing that what they have believed all their lives does not match with the Scriptures, will get angry. They will accuse you of being narrow-minded and lacking love, they will accuse you of "hate speech" if you name their particular sin, and they may get loud and physically aggressive to demonstrate their anger with what they have just heard. This anger is their response to them having just lost their comfort, so do not be side-tracked or discouraged. It is just another step to get past if we want to get them to the point of obedience.

In a very real sense, anger was Herodias' reaction to John the Baptist's declaration to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). She did not like what she heard and her response was that she "held it against him and

wanted to kill him” (Mark 6:19). At the first opportunity to do so, that is exactly what she had done!

When, or if, others get angry upon hearing the truth, do not take it personally; it is not about you, though they may make it appear to be the case. Their anger is at having learned the truth and discovering that they have been deceived, or that their family now “looks bad” because they were not following the truth, though they claimed to be. If someone gets angry, redirect them to the Scripture and their apparent desire to be right and plead with them to do what is right so that reason for anger is removed. Help them to move on to obedience and forgiveness, or some will be angry for the rest of their lives. Some get so angry, they reject all religious teachings from that day forward.

Bargaining. In this stage, some will not try to deny what they have heard, but try to make the situation less unpleasant by trying to “bargain” with God and the Scriptures. “It doesn’t really mean that,” or, “But God is such a loving God...” — and on and on as they try to get around the reality they have just discovered.

We see this again in the example of King Saul. When Samuel pointed out the livestock that was obviously not destroyed, Saul pleaded, “They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed” (1st Sam. 15:15); when Samuel again pointed out his disobedience, King Saul further stated, “But I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, ...But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed” (1st Sam. 15: 20, 21). It wasn’t until Samuel told him his kingdom would be taken from him that King Saul finally admitted the truth.

When someone begins trying to “bargain” with the Scriptures, make sure that you keep them focused on what it says. It doesn’t matter what you or I think about it or what we want to be the case; what does the Scriptures say? Obedience to God’s word is what matters and there will be no “bargaining” that will change things.

Depression. Many people get to this point and feel “numb” to the reality they have just faced. Anger and denial may linger, but, at this point, they simply don’t know what to do. They have learned the truth, but their family relations or their situation is such that change is too difficult for them to imagine, so they remain in this mental “limbo” where they are too afraid or confused to make a decision about what to do next. I believe Felix experienced this, to some degree, when, upon hearing Paul speak about “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come” he was afraid and sent Paul away until that “convenient time” that never came (Acts 24:25).

It is important to recognize this reaction so they we do not simply leave them with the expressed desire that we “hope they obey soon.” If we never try to get them past this point, obedience will never come. Emphasize the need for a positive response to the truth, address their fears and doubts; comfort them with the hope of the promise of salvation and encourage them to bring the truths they have learned to those they love so they can be saved, too. We want them to be saved!

Acceptance. Ideally, this is where we want all people to be. It is at this point that they have put aside all anger, denial, depression, and attempts at bargaining and accepted the truth and acted accordingly. In the New Testament, we read of a man named Saul who violently opposed the truth and those who held and taught it (cf. Acts

8:1-3). But, once he accepted the truth, he became a powerful worker for the truth and was willing to lay his life on the line for it. That is the power of acceptance!

Every individual must get to this point if they are to be saved, and we must bring them there by answering their doubts, fears, and questions about what they have known and done, what to do if their family has not followed these truths, and we have shown them clearly that there is no other way (Acts 4:12). Remember, though, that they must be convinced, not coerced. If they have not mentally and intellectually accepted the truth, they will not stand long. Give them reasons to move past their loss of assurance so they can gain true salvation.

Two Prayers

Last night my little boy
Confessed to me some childish wrong.
And kneeling at my knee he prayed with tears,
“Dear God, make a man
Like Daddy, wise and strong; I know you can.”

Then while he slept, I knelt beside his bed,
Confessed my sins, and prayed with low-bowed head:
“O God, make me a child like my child here,
Pure, guileless, and trusting Thee, with faith sincere.”