

Elephant in the Pew
Week 2 - Abuse

Matthew 18

The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven

1At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

2He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

5"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 6But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

7"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! 8If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

Four Lessons from Matthew 18

1. **Power** is opportunity to show God's protective grace. (v. 1)
2. **Humility** breaks the addictive nature of power. (v. 2-4)
3. **Justice** will come to those who abuse power. (5-6)
4. The abusive cycle can be broken through getting **help** (v. 7-9)

JIM HOPPER, PH.D.

Instructor in Psychology, Harvard Medical School

Researcher, Therapist, & Independent Consultant

Will I (my child, husband, friend, etc.) be forever damaged by the abuse?"

[Dr. Hopper] has three basic answers, or at least beginnings of answers to these questions:

1. Being abused and/or neglected as a child are not the only painful and potentially damaging experiences that human beings may suffer in childhood.
2. Whether or not, and to what extent child abuse and neglect (or other painful experiences) have negative effects depends on a variety of factors - related to the abuse itself, but also to relationships, in which the abuse and the child's responses occur.
3. Child abuse, in itself, does not "doom" people to lives of horrible suffering.

Child Abuse and the Human Condition

It is important to consider these issues in relation to what some people refer to as "the human condition." By this [Dr. Hopper] mean[s]:

- * All human beings suffer painful experiences, and some of these occur in childhood.
- * All caregivers of children are sometimes unable to protect them from painful experiences.
- * We all need love and support to deal with the effects of painful experiences.
- * Everyone must find ways to cope with the emotions generated by painful experiences - whether or not we get love and support from others.
- * Many coping or self-regulation strategies work in some ways, but also limit people in other ways. For example:
 - * Some people suffer more painful experiences than others, and abuse is one of many possible causes of extreme emotional pain (others include life-threatening illness, death of a loved one, physical disfigurement, etc.).
 - * Some people get more love and support from their families and friends than others, and families in which abuse occurs tend to provide less of the love and support needed to recover from abuse. But families in which abuse does not happen can also experience significant problems, and can make it hard for family members to deal with the inevitable painful experiences in life.
 - * Finally, because everyone needs caring relationships and love, emotional neglect can be more devastating than abuse, particularly in the earliest years of life.

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o Ignoring painful feelings may reduce one's conscious experience of them. But it also prevents one from learning how to manage them in smaller doses, let alone larger ones - which makes one vulnerable to alternating between feeling little or no emotions and being overwhelmed and unable to cope with them.

o Avoiding getting close to people and trying to hide all of one's pain and vulnerabilities may create a sense of safety. But this approach to relationships leads to a great deal of loneliness, prevents experiences and learning about developing true intimacy and trust, and makes one vulnerable to desperately and naively putting trust in the wrong people and being betrayed again.

o At the extreme, getting really drunk can block out painful memories and feelings, including the feeling of being disconnected from others - but cause lots of other problems and disconnections from people.

Approximately one in six boys is sexually abused before age 16.

For the most recent and authoritative evidence supporting the 1 in 6 prevalence estimate, read the study of 17,000 California residents, Long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse by gender of victim, published in 2005 by Shanta Dube and colleagues in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.