

“Impact vs Intent: A Lesson I Learned from my Dad”

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Since it's Father's Day, I would like to share with you one of the lessons I learned from my dad. Please pray with me:

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

I grew up in a small town. A couple of blocks away was a field with a stand of trees where all the neighborhood kids shared tree forts. We don't really know who started building them, but as each child in the neighborhood got old enough, we'd eventually find our way over to the tree fort. One day, as I was about to go to the fort with my next door neighbor, my dad said, "Take your little brother with you, and keep an eye on him!"

Now, if any of you are older siblings, you probably remember that there was a time when taking your younger sibling anywhere felt like a chore. But, of course, off I went with my brother and my neighbor. All the way to the fort and even while we played there, we kept nagging my brother to keep up. And he, wanting so desperately to be part of our group, kept running after us and calling for us to wait. I wasn't patient. As soon as I got to the tree, I started climbing and forgot to watch him. But half way up the tree I heard a terrible scream from him. I scrambled down to find him screaming and crying, lying on the ground. He had stepped on a nail and it was still stuck in his foot.

My first reaction was to feel terribly guilty. I hadn't intended for him to be hurt and I hadn't been the one to carelessly leave a board with a nail in it lying in the ground. But my brother got hurt on my watch. It wasn't my fault, but I was responsible.

My younger self wasn't good with guilt. It made me feel too uncomfortable, too ashamed. So my friend and I turned that guilt outward and started to blame my brother. We called him a baby for crying so much, and yelled at him for not watching where he was going. But finally it became obvious that I had to go home and get my parents. I fumed all the way, thinking about how unfair it was that my little brother was such a pest.

When I got home, I announced in an irritated voice, "Dad, Scott stepped on a nail and you'll have to go get him."

And suddenly the normally calm, quiet atmosphere of my home exploded in intense action. My mom and dad rushed around, grabbing purse and wallet, while asking in terse voices to know exactly what happened. Stumbling over my words, I told them that I hadn't meant for him to get hurt.

Then my dad stopped, right before walking out the door, looked me in the eye and said, "It doesn't matter what you meant. He DID get hurt."

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. I was supposed to have been watching my brother and now he was really hurt. What had I done?

There are ways that my experience is somewhat similar to that of the Corinthians we read about today. The church at Corinth was divided; the siblings weren't getting along and somebody in the church had done something to hurt their leader and founder, the apostle Paul. In another letter to them, Paul had asked them to reprimand the one who had wounded him and then urged them all to repent.

Paul explains why repentance is so important in this second letter to the Corinthians. When talking to his church about why he asked for their repentance, even though it caused them grief, Paul says:

“Now I’m glad—not that you were upset, but that you were jarred into turning things around. You let the distress bring you to God, not drive you from him. The result was all gain, no loss. Distress that drives us to God does that. It turns us around. It gets us back in the way of salvation. We never regret that kind of pain. But those who let distress drive them away from God are full of regrets, end up on a deathbed of regrets.”

Paul is talking about the distress caused by guilt. Distress of this kind is good because it causes us to want to repent and change. We know from psychologists that people’s greatest learning comes when they are uncomfortable. Comfort leads to complacency—to a feeling that no change is necessary, no action is necessary. But when we allow ourselves to feel discomfort, that discomfort can galvanize us into wanting to apologize and do something different. That’s what repentance is. It should cause us to turn to God and ask how we should respond to what we’ve done. Instead of focusing on ourselves, our guilt or our pain, and instead of focusing on our intentions, we turn our minds outward towards the ones impacted by our actions and ask God for direction and forgiveness. God teaches us to accept responsibility for our past errors, but not to wallow in them. That’s what Paul is talking about here.

And that is what my dad was trying to teach me when he told me that my intent didn’t matter; what mattered was the impact of my actions or inaction. Our intentions are important, but when people are hurt, what we need to focus on is the impact of our actions. This focus is what will cause us the guilt and discomfort that will lead to true repentance. In my case, whatever my intentions, I hadn’t been watching my brother because I thought doing so was a chore, and so he got hurt. I needed to say that I was sorry, to learn from my mistake, and to try to do better next time.

This is a lesson I try to hang onto, especially in these recent months. Recently, I have heard story after story about the ways that my siblings of color have been harmed in our society. I often feel guilty when I hear these stories, even when I know that I know that I never intend any harm towards them. Yet I am part of a system that harms people of color and, as a white person, I benefit from that system. I need to focus on the impact of this system and my own actions or inactions, not on my intent. This focus can help me keep my focus on changing the system, rather than on my own guilt.

When my parents finally carried my brother into the house, after having been to the hospital, I was a little puddle of guilt and regret. When my mom told me that the nail had gone through my brother’s tennis shoe, through the bottom of his foot, and all the way to the top of his foot...well, I couldn’t do anything but stand there and cry. Later that night, I padded out to the living room and found my dad, sitting in his chair. Eyes downcast, horror and shame roiling through me, I quietly said, “I’m sorry, dad. It was my fault. I’ll watch over Scott more carefully next time.” My dad knew what the apostle Paul knew. True repentance and a willingness to change and grow leads to forgiveness. He looked at me gravely for a moment, then he bundled me up into his arms. He said, “I forgive you. Scott’s going to be okay and everything will be alright.” And it was. Thanks be to God.