

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

Combatting Mental Illness Stigma

JESUS CHRIST — THE STIGMATIZED SON OF GOD / SON OF MAN

“[Jesus] was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held Him in low esteem” (Isaiah 53:3 NIV).

SUMMARY OF JOHN 9:1-7

- In Jesus’ time, many believed that illness or disability resulted from personal sin, leading to them being declared social outcasts — even untouchables.
- This was the assumption when encountering a blind man. Jesus countered this belief, saying, ***“Neither this man nor his parents sinned...but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in his life.”***
- Feelings of isolation or rejection are common, and some may link mental health challenges to lack of faith.
- Jesus always saw the opportunity for the works of God to be displayed through the lives of those stigmatized as being of lesser worth because of brokenness.

MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA involves viewing conditions as personal faults, leading to stereotypes, exclusion, discrimination — and self-stigma.

- Self-stigma occurs when the person with a mental health condition adopts negative societal stereotypes about themselves.
- Families and spouses may also be unjustly blamed for mental illness, with stigma often linking issues to poor parenting or inadequate support.
- Addressing stigma means providing accurate information and education.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- **IF DIAGNOSED WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE:** What are some of the fears or misinformation (stigma) that you have felt or heard from others and/or the stigma that you have believed about yourself (self-stigma).
- **IF A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND DESIRING TO SUPPORT:** What are some of the fears or misinformation (stigma) that you have felt or heard from others and/or the stigma that you have believed about yourself (e.g., "I'm a bad parent," "I'm an unloving spouse," etc.).

MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA OCCURS WHEN people view mental health conditions as disgraceful, leading to negative stereotypes and exclusion.

- Stigma discourages compassion and makes those affected feel isolated.
- When Jesus addressed the blind man, He rejected blame and stigma, instead he emphasized the importance of valuing him, responding with kindness, and instilling hope for a future.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- **IF DIAGNOSED WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE:** What are some different ways you have seen people respond like Jesus, seeing your true value and conveying love and grace.
- **IF A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND DESIRING TO SUPPORT:** What are some different ways you have seen people respond like Jesus, seeing the true value of you and/or your loved one, and conveying love and grace.

WRONGLY HELD VIEWS AND BELIEFS (stigma) are harmful, but we can choose to reject them.

- Mental health struggles do not prevent God from working in our lives; instead, they offer opportunities for Him to show love and grace throughout our entire journey, including family and marriage.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- **IF DIAGNOSED WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE:** What is one small way you've seen God work in your life through your mental health difficulty.
- **IF A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND DESIRING TO SUPPORT:** What is one small way you've seen God work in your life through your journey of supporting your loved one.

THREE HEROS OF THE FAITH WHO TRANSFORMED THEIR PAIN & STIGMA

"It is what it is — what I decide to do with what is, greatly determines my joy, my strength, and my future."

— Tim Reside

PAUL THE APOSTLE (c. AD 1 to AD 67) was an early convert to Christianity who became a missionary that traveled extensively spreading the good news of Christ to non-Jewish Gentiles. He founded numerous churches in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) and Europe.

- Traditionally, he wrote 13 or 14 of the books of the New Testament — nearly half.
- Some scholars say 7 with the rest written by his followers after his death.
- His writings were written before Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- He had a chronic life challenge that he called a "thorn in the flesh" — a "messenger of Satan."
- He ends up turning a perceived liability into an asset — by grace.

"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:8-10 NIV).

Another remarkable comment shows up in his letter to the church at Galatia in current day Turkey:

“As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself” (Galatians 4:13-14 NIV).

CHARLES SPURGEON (1834-1892) was a powerful preacher, well-known for his wit and humor during the nineteenth-century.

- Spurgeon preached almost 3,600 sermons and wrote nearly 200 books.
- This produced the largest number of books by any author in Christian history.
- He regularly preached to a congregation of around 6,000 people.
- His largest single audience was **23,654** people — WITHOUT A MICROPHONE!
- Spurgeon lived a life saturated with physical, emotional, and spiritual sufferings, including seasons of severe depression.

“I am the subject of depressions of the spirit, so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go [through].”

TRANSFORMATION MINDSET

Spurgeon chose to embrace his suffering as a divine "school" for learning lessons leading to God's wisdom and power that cannot be taught in any other way.

“There is no university for a Christian like that of sorrow and trial.”

MOTHER TERESA (1910-1997) was officially declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church on September 4, 2016, for her work with those who were cast out, rejected, poor, sick, and dying.

- She founded 610 missions in 123 countries.
- Just before her death, she revealed that she had suffered for roughly 50 years from intense spiritual darkness and/or depression.

“There is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything were dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started the work.”

A CAUTIONARY TALE

It's possible that had Mother Teresa shared the fact of her suffering earlier in life, medical diagnosis and treatment may have lessened her pain.

The understandable spiritualization of her symptoms likely contributed to Mother Teresa not considering a physiological cause.

This does not mean that Mother Teresa lived anything other than an exemplary life of courage, faithfulness, and devotion to Christ.

TRANSFORMATION MINDSET

Mother Teresa chose to live sacrificially and selflessly for those she loved — Christ and those given to her by Him to rescue and care for.
This was the joy that was her strength.

A TAKEAWAY ACTION CHALLENGE

- Recognize that others wrongly held beliefs about mental health difficulties and disorders are not your fault — but consider the possibility that it is your responsibility to take some positive action.
- **IF DIAGNOSED WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE:** Talk with a supportive relative or friend and help educate those closest to you about your condition. Remember, although you may struggle with a mental health difficulty or disorder, your worth is not defined by it.
- **IF A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND DESIRING TO SUPPORT:** This week, talk with a supportive relative or friend about helping educate those closest to you about your loved one's condition. Be prepared to respond simply and truthfully to individuals who ask about your loved one's mental health journey.

GRACE ALLIANCE SOURCE ATTRIBUTION: Some material content here has been adapted from materials created by Grace Alliance (Mental Health Grace Alliance) based in Waco, Texas. Joe Padilla, Co-founder, Executive Director & President of Mental Health Grace Alliance, gave permission by email. Details regarding this organization and its available resources can be located by conducting a Google search for "Mental Health Grace Alliance Resources." This lesson adapts material from GA "Living Grace" workbook Chapter Three and "Family Grace" workbook Chapter Three.