

Victim or Volunteer?

[or how to resist the peddling of guilt-merchants]

by clint wagnon

I once had a counseling mentor who often said, “There are no victims here, only volunteers.” He had a gift for matter-of-factness. It sounded callous, but I understood what he was saying. Although we cannot control what happens to us, we can control how we respond to what happens to us. That we’ve been disappointed, let-down, hurt, provoked, doesn’t make us unique... it makes us part of the human experience. “Welcome to the planet, everyone’s here.”¹ The New Testament puts it this way: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. (1 Cor. 10:13).” We’ve all been victims at one time or another. But at some point, we cease to be victims, and we start to be volunteers. This is especially true of the guilt-merchants... those precious people who try to control our lives with guilt, shame, manipulation and intimidation. Guilt-merchants are the ultimate volunteers, and they’re constantly hunting recruits to join them in their misery. Beware the merchant’s charms... that snake will bite you.

For some reading these words, it is a parent. Some, a spouse. Others, a “needy” friend, a jaded sibling, a jealous co-worker. They use their lot in life as pretext for making sure you do not live yours to the full. Their ultimate weapon is to cast their self-pity and bait others with shame and guilt, but the liberating truth is this: no one can *make* you feel anything! You must give permission to manipulation. You must volunteer your soul to give a guilt-merchant control. And once you do, remember these words: “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey... (Rom 6:16)”

This may all seem a little harsh, but hold with me, and you’ll see the light. I’m not suggesting that we be insensitive to the hurts or hang-ups of other people. Absolutely not! On the contrary, Scripture demands that we be compassionate, merciful, and forbearing with one another.

I am warning, however, that there are those selective few who would (consciously or not) like to manage you through emotional terrorism, and as part of the tribe of Jesus Christ, it is not your prerogative to let codependent or demanding people master you. It is your responsibility to submit to Christ’s control over your life, your marriage, your career, your choices; and to not surrender those things to someone who is “warped and sinful... self-condemned (Titus 3:11).”

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Guilt-merchants love misery like a heroin addict loves his needle. It is a deplorable romance. It causes them pain, ruins their relationships, wrecks their lives, but they don’t know how to live without it. Anything else seems too foreign, and at least chaos feels normal. So they nurse the victim mentality and try at every turn to validate their victimology.

¹ From “Dare You to Move”, *The Beautiful Letdown* by SwitchFoot

I've learned the secret to keeping guilt-merchants at bay. It is security.

Here is how it works: When you're insecure, you're like chum in the water for sharks. They smell the blood of your weak spots and prey on your insecurities, and of course, you volunteer as a meal. But when you're secure, what others think of you holds nowhere near as much weight. The sharks will circle, and even strike, but you will survive. People cannot be okay with others when they're not okay with themselves. And people are inherently incapable of being okay with themselves until they're okay with the One who made them.

“When you internalize this reality, you see the shallowness of self-esteem and the depth of divine security!”

Real security comes from right relationship, right fellowship, and right perspective to God. When you're okay with Him, it gives you the proper view of yourself. Of course you're broken and battered and you blow it all the time (see Romans 7:15-25), but you realize you're okay... not because of *performance*, but because of *position*. You've been placed in Him, He in you, and no one or no thing can change that (see Romans 8:35-39). When you internalize this reality, you see the shallowness of self-esteem and the depth of divine security!

Once you become okay with God, you can finally be at peace with yourself. When you are at peace with yourself, you can finally be at peace with others... whether or not they are at peace with you.

That's when you realize, it would be great if my mom, or my husband, or my friend was what I wished they were... but if not, I'm still okay. I accept them as they are, but I don't have to be a volunteer anymore. In fact, I don't have a right to be. My life is not my own. It has been bought with a price. And the one who purchased it has explicitly said there is room for only one God. Those who would like to be to us our god find the position already filled, and besides, they never qualified in the first place.

Approval-addiction is a brazen symptom of basic insecurity. Adoption is the ultimate cure for that insecurity. Being chosen, picked out and paid for [by a King!] will do wonders for one's sense of self-worth and will seed the courage needed to stand up, speak up, and break free. The performance trap doesn't fit well for royalty, and guilt-merchants find no buyers for their wares in palaces.



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