

UNMASKING OUR HIDDEN HURTS

By Karen Leonhardt

It can begin as simply as taking a deep breath and putting on a smile when we really feel like crying, or responding that things are “fine” when they really aren’t. In many small ways, each of us hides some of our pain from others. We often see this as necessary, especially when we are dealing with people we do not know well. The problem is that we become *too good* at masking our pain. We are so used to concealing our hurts from the people we meet that it becomes a habit.

Most of the time, we can justify our reluctance to share the truth about the hurts of our lives. We believe we have good reasons for not letting down our guard.

It is hard to find someone to listen. We say, “Whom could I tell? ... Who would listen? ... My friends are so busy with their own lives these days ... Everyone has his or her own problems ...” It may be hard to find someone close to us who is able to listen. Many times when people ask how we are doing, they are not expecting a truly honest response. Can you imagine the look on a store clerk’s face if you actually *told her* how your day had been?

Still, there are people in our lives whom we need to be able to trust with our hurts. We want to look





to family and to friends, but that doesn't always work. Sometimes our families cannot be with us because of distance or divorce or death. Other times our family and friends are close by, but they cannot be the support we need. We look around, and it seems like everyone we know is struggling. We don't want to add to their burdens. Besides, we are so used to setting aside our own needs to look out for the interests of others that we often fail to ask for help when we should.

There are some things that are very hard to tell others. It is difficult to remove our own masks and admit, even to ourselves, that things are hurting us. Admitting it to others is just as difficult, if not more so. This is especially true since our hidden hurts are usually ones that aren't easy to talk about. The hurts we hide are the ones associated with guilt or shame. We may worry that people will treat us differently.

We get admired for being stoic. "I don't know how you do it," people often say. We are rewarded for being happy and for being able to handle anything. It may be hard to let go of that image people have of us. We *want* to be the brave, strong, and capable people that others perceive us to be.

We are afraid of what our struggles mean about our relationship with God. We think our Christian life should visibly demonstrate the wonderful news that we have been saved by God's grace. When things go wrong in our lives, or in the lives of our spouse or children, we may wonder if problems in our spiritual

life are to blame. We want to be "a city on a hill" that points the way to Jesus, but we may feel that our light has grown too dim (Matthew 5:14–16). We have this false idea that certain types of sin or pain should not show up in the lives of "good Christians."

The Bible warns us that we are all still sinners, even after we have been saved by the grace of God. Even though we look at someone like St. Paul as a great apostle of Christ, he still calls himself the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:14–16). Paul confesses that, even after having seen Christ on the road to Damascus, even after all the miracles he witnessed, he still struggled and failed to do what was right (Romans 7:15–25). In fact, there is no such thing as a "good" Christian — only forgiven ones. We are all sinners redeemed by grace alone. We don't point to our own lives as an example of strength — instead we point to Christ and what He has done despite our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

So what do we do to deal with the hidden hurts in our lives? How do we remove the masks we have become so used to wearing? The first thing we do is cry out to God who will always be there to hear us: *But I call to God, and the LORD saves me. Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and He hears my voice* (Psalm 55:16–17). We rely on His promises to sustain us.

None of our hurts are hidden from God. He knows our pain. The Psalmist writes: *All my longings lie open before You, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from You* (Psalm 38:9). He hears even the silent

cry that we cannot raise (Romans 8:26).

We don't have to hide the hurts of our lives from God or from others.

By coming out from under the burden of silence, and acknowledging the pain and brokenness of our lives to God, we experience freedom. We are finally able to let go of the masks we have been hiding behind and let down our guard.

God forgives and heals our hidden hurts. His forgiveness lifts from us the weight of sin, and it offers healing. We receive comfort in this life while we wait on the ultimate restoration of heaven.

We treat others with compassion. knowing they, too, struggle with sin and pain in their lives. God's forgiveness also restores us to a community again — to the body of believers. When we are honest about our own hidden hurts, we often find that people willingly lay open their own hurts to us in response. We begin to share one another's burdens and help to carry those burdens together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Not only do we find freedom for ourselves, but we help others to find the same healing for their hidden hurts.

No matter how deep our pain is hidden, Christ's love for us runs deeper (Ephesians 3:14–21). Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

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