**“GETTING PAST OUR PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE TENDENCIES,” By Tony Gulledge**

Before we had reached the city limits, I could already feel a tension building in my neck

and shoulders. What was it about going home for family gatherings that seemed to always bring

out the worst in me? I knew that just seeing my brothers would bring up a simmering anger that

otherwise remained carefully concealed below the surface. From the time we were little kids in

Sunday School, my brothers and I had been taught that harboring anger was wrong. Anger

should only be displayed for a righteous cause such as in Matthew 21:12 where Jesus was

cleansing the temple of money changers. Still this twinge of pain usually left me on edge for

most of the visit.

My anger had never been manifested in big blow ups or verbal altercations. Instead

well placed one liners or callous jokes proved to be my personal weapons of choice. “Just

Teasing,” had become our family’s way of dealing with each other’s petty annoyances and

pointless irritations. Even though I have been a Christian now for well over thirty years the

mean spirited joking had become my habitual sin. If we are all adults now, then where had the

provocations come from?

Matthew McKay, Peter Rogers, and Judith McKay in their book WHEN ANGER

HURTS, Quieting The Storm Within, gave me one good answer. “People fight to maintain their

boundaries and limits. Losing the capacity to say no, to have choice, and to make independent

decisions is a kind of psychological death. You feel as if you were being engulfed or

suffocated… No matter how frightening or coercive anger becomes it can never be as scary as

the loss of self.”

Psychological death was what I felt inside. In my own mind going home

represented a struggle to re-establish my sense of self. Hadn’t I resolved this issue during my

teenage years? Is it possible that I might not have fully completed this developmental step?

I remembered from college Psychology that my type of coerce or manipulative anger

was termed Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder, PAPD. According to Kaplan, H.I. &

Saddock, B.J. (1997) SYNOPSIS OF PSYCHIATRY, 8th ed. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins:

“People with PAPD are characterized by covert obstructionism, procrastination, stubbornness,

and inefficiency. Such behavior is a manifestation of passively expressed underlying

aggression.”

Bingo! That was me. But what was I so angry about that would cause me to make snide

or sarcastic comments to my brothers every time we got together? It wasn’t like I was

purposefully trying to be hard to get along with. Or was I? But none the less, my backhanded

jokes had definitely become a habit. If Jesus had commanded us in Matthew 19:19 to love our

neighbors as we love ourselves, wasn’t this defiant stance of clinging to passive aggressive

tendencies causing me to miss the mark?

At this point most Christians would fall into the trap of thinking that all anger is sin.

Simply ignoring the anger will not make it go away. Instead it can take root inside of us and

wait for a more opportune time to express itself. While expressing the anger as an indirect joke

might have made me feel better for a few brief moments it did little to resolve the deep-seated

anger issue within me. The joking might have initially released some of the pressure but had

never touched the legitimate hurt. I asked myself if it wasn’t time to get past my feelings of

jealousy and embarrassment and learn how to directly confront these deeper issues in a God

honoring way.

**CONSTRUCTIVE CONFRONTATION**:

Mark Gorkin, LMSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) also known as AOL’s “The

Stress Doc.”, has written an article entitled, “Transforming Aggression with Higher Power I’s”.

Here the Stress Doc. helps us with meaningful confrontations by suggesting the IDEA acronym

for replacing aggression with assertion.

I = Use an “I” Statement, Question or Observation.

D = Describe the Problem Specifically.

E = Explain Your Upset – Effects and Expectations.

A = Acknowledge Others and Ask for Input.

Ok, I could follow this formula but confrontation was scary business. It’s not like me or

my siblings were ever given classes on assertiveness training while growing up. Consequently

we never learned how to confront anger in a Godly manner. Back in the day, anger was a

something we Christians were expected to stuff or get rid of. Who knows, maybe taking the

IDEA confrontation method to heart could have saved us countless years of turmoil and stress.

But who was I kidding? It’s not like most of us just roll out of bed each morning with

spontaneous, expressive communication.

John Ortberg in his book EVERYBODY’S NORMAL TILL YOU GET TO KNOW

THEM explains that we all need Truth Tellers in our lives. He writes, “Everyone one of us

needs a few people to tell us the truth about our hearts and souls. We all have weak spots and

blind spots that we cannot navigate on our own. We need someone to help us question our

motives and examine our consciences.” If I’m honest I have always had a great truth teller in my

life, my wife. Even before we were married she pointed out the harshness of our family’s covert

attacks. Sadly, I dismissed her wise insights and continued to perpetuate my pain. If you or I

couldn’t or wouldn’t see the need for constructive confrontations maybe we should all seek out

truth tellers.

**CHOOSE MERCY AND FORGIVENESS**:

Lamentations 3:2 states, “It is only the Lord’s mercies that have kept us from complete

destruction.” Dr. Charles Stanley in his book, THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS writes:

“Forgiveness is a process that can be painful and at times seems unending. Whatever our pain,

whatever our situation we can not afford to hold onto an unforgiving spirit another day. If we

will persevere and keep our eyes on the One who forgave us, it will be a liberating force like

nothing else we have ever experienced. “

When was the last time I had truly expressed mercy to either of my two brothers? I had

never even asked God to unveil what my own hidden issues might be. Over the last couple of

years, I have asked God to bring up the hurts and irrational beliefs to the surface so that I could

examine them. One by one I have had to seek forgiveness for my part of the problem. For

some of those issues direct confrontation was needed. But for most issues it has simply been a

matter of me choosing to forgive and move forward.

**LEARN TO LEAVE THE HURT WITH GOD**:

In 1 Peter 2:1, Peter urges us to “rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit,

hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. “Peter knew that if we hung on to these sinful

practices they would destroy us. And then Paul in Galatians 5:16, 22, 23: gives us these

instructions: ”So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Some of the issues with my brothers have been confronted in a successful manner and are

now resolved. At the same time some other problems with their negative attitudes and

behaviors have not changed. Regardless, I have resolved that even if I never see a change in

their behaviors or attitudes, I know now that I must leave the results up to God. Harboring

resentment or seeking retaliation can only multiple my problems. I had been informed of how

the Lord wanted me to behave with regard to my anger. Any other reaction would quench his

Spirit and be considered a Sub-Christian response.

**MAINTAIN AN ATTITUDE OF GRADITUDE**:

One final thing that has helped me immensely in learning to conquer this passive

aggressive mindset is to constantly remind myself of just who I am in Christ. Thanking him for

all the extraordinary benefits and privileges we have as his sons and daughters causes me to be

willing to lay aside those petty grievances I once held so closely. Gratitude for all he has done

for me leaves no other choice than a humble desire to change and grow for Him.

When we sift through all the junk and get down to the most important things in life it

comes back to relationships. . Why not make our worth God the focus of our full attention and

worship? The past is over and a new day with tremendous opportunities awaits us. Laying

aside our passive aggressive tendencies truly means that our best days are yet to come!