

Self-Inflicted Suffering
Presented by Mary Lowman
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Day One

Did you ever see someone literally bang his or her head against a brick wall? We use that phrase a lot, but I've never seen anyone purposely do it, have you? If I did, I'd probably think that person was mentally ill. That's not normal behavior, to inflict physical suffering on your own body. Yet, how often we inflict other kinds of suffering on ourselves—self-inflicted suffering that is unnecessary and does us a great deal of damage.

Bitterness would have to be at the top of that list of self-inflicted suffering. Bitterness is the result of keeping a record of wrongs done against us. It comes from refusing to forgive. It happens when we continually re-live how our feelings were hurt, how our pride was damaged, how our toes were stepped on.

What I've discovered is when we harbor feelings of bitterness, the wrong done against us grows in our minds. It becomes greatly exaggerated until we lose our perspective, and it seems much worse than it really is.

Let me tell you the consequences of bitterness. First, it changes your physical appearance and not for the better. A bitter person ages quickly, looks tired and haggard and unattractive. I don't care how well you dress or how much makeup you wear, bitterness cannot be camouflaged. It makes you look ugly.

Second, bitterness ruins relationships. No one really wants to be with a bitter person, because they get tired of hearing their sad story all the time. Bitter people are so focused on the wrong done to them they tend to talk about it a lot. And, if you've noticed, that just drives people away in droves.

Third, bitterness shortens your life because it adds extraordinary amounts of stress and fatigue. It is one of your major energy leaks; it just keeps you exhausted.

Bitterness is self-inflicted suffering. That means anytime you decide to, you can stop suffering from bitterness. Forgiveness is your choice; forsaking your anger is your choice. Tearing up that list of wrongs done to you is your choice. Nobody can force you to be bitter if you don't want to be. I don't care how justified you may be in feeling bitter, all it does is destroy you.

Will you stop beating your head against that wall of bitterness today? It's self-inflicted suffering. Remember, you can choose to let go of the bitterness right now, by God's grace.

Day Two

Most of us have enough respect for our bodies not to beat our heads against brick walls, right? And yet we may be inflicting suffering on ourselves in other ways that are even more harmful and foolish.

Yesterday we saw how bitterness is always self-inflicted suffering. The second one is self-pity. Have you had any pity parties lately? I've come to the conclusion that pity parties are pitiful! Why?

First, because almost always, pity parties cause you to waste time. I remember a time long ago when someone had hurt my feelings, and so I thought, "I'm not going to do anything tonight; I have a right to just do nothing and feel sorry for myself." Then it dawned on me the enemy was trying to hinder me by tempting me to throw a pity party. That's when I began to realize how pitiful pity parties are.

Not only do pity parties waste your time, but they also waste your energy. Self-pity drains you. You spend a lot of emotional energy when you are feeling sorry for yourself. That means you don't have energy for other things that are important.

Another result of self-pity is it affects your performance. You slow down, you lose motivation, you do your work halfheartedly—or, maybe you just quit!

If you're tired of the self-inflicted suffering of pity parties, here are some suggestions:

Change your attitude about pity parties.

Ask God to give you holy anger about pity parties, to see them as he sees them, and to get sick and tired of feeling sorry for yourself.

Refuse to think about the bad reports!

In Philippians 4:8 we are told to think about things that are of a good report. Usually, when we are having a pity party, we are thinking about some bad report. It has helped me greatly to tell myself, "Mary, stop thinking about the bad reports. Think about some good reports."

Think about Jesus and all he endured.

Hebrews 12:2 says *let us fix our eyes on Jesus...* By a set of your will, stop thinking about poor me, and think about Jesus—fix your eyes on him. Think about how he suffered for you, and you will be embarrassed to feel sorry for yourself.

Day Three

Self-inflicted suffering—got any of that going on in your life right now? I'm examining things we do to make our own lives much more difficult and miserable. For example, we've seen how bitterness and self-pity are always self-inflicted, and are they ever miserable. But you can stop being bitter and shut down your pity parties any time you choose to.

Another suffering we inflict on ourselves is lack of discipline. Discipline does not come easy for me. I don't think discipline is much fun, to tell you the truth. And it would be very easy for me to be an undisciplined person.

But what I've learned—and am learning—is discipline is the necessary path to success and achievement. It is essential for turning dreams into realities and visions into accomplishments. But if you're not willing to put needed disciplines into your life, you are inflicting some costly suffering on yourself.

For example, without being disciplined in your eating habits and exercise, you are not going to live as long, not going to have as much energy, and are much more likely to catch diseases and be ill.

Poor work habits are another example. When people are habitually late for work, fail to follow-through, aren't dependable, and do their work in a sloppy manner, it's because they are undisciplined. And that leads to lost opportunities, lost pay increases, maybe even lost jobs! All self-inflicted from poor discipline in key areas.

There are many other examples I could cite but the question is, how do you become more disciplined? I would encourage you to find ways to impose discipline in your life. What works for you? For me, I use

gimmicks and journals and time management techniques and reminders and self-rewards—all kinds of things to help me be the disciplined person I know I must be to accomplish what I want to accomplish.

Choose one area where your discipline is weak and pray about it every day. Ask God to strengthen you for discipline in that area. Then look for accountability and gimmicks to help you impose discipline in that area. Work on one area at a time, because when you are successful there, it will encourage you to be successful in other areas. Proverbs says we can die from lack of discipline.

Day Four

You know, we've all got enough troubles in this world without inflicting more on ourselves unnecessarily. Obviously, the smart thing for any of us to do is to get rid of those self-inflicted sufferings.

Bitterness, self-pity and lack of discipline are the three we've discussed already this week. How about being negative? That's about as harmful as anything I can think of. Are you a negative person? Do you gripe and complain frequently? Do you tend to look on the dark side all the time? Do you focus on people's faults rather than their good points? How much of your speech is in negative territory? What about your thought life?

I sure wish someone had warned me about negativity earlier in my life. Perhaps I just didn't listen, but I now certainly recognize how important it is not to dwell in negativity. It is self-inflicted suffering.

Every time you focus on the bad things—whether it's the weather or a friend's faults or your sore throat or your workload—then you immediately add a lot of stress to your life. In addition, negativity slows you down because it wastes your energy. Your negativity harms others as well. You drag others down with you, and you drive people away.

Here's the cure for negativity: thankfulness. Paul wrote to the Colossians:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness (Colossians 2:6-7).

Frequently I say to myself: "Mary, overflow with thankfulness today." I can choose to overflow with thankfulness, or I can choose to be negative. Being negative is self-inflicted suffering. Check it out; you may not realize just how often you slide into negative territory. If you'll be more positive, you'll discover enormous benefits and great relief from that self-inflicted suffering.

Day Five

If you went to a doctor today and he told you something you are doing is going to shorten your life and cause you great physical harm, would you not be willing to listen to his advice and abandon that destructive behavior? I've been examining self-inflicted suffering. We've seen how bitterness, self-pity, lack of discipline, and negativity are always self-inflicted and cause us great harm.

Why do we so often do things that inflict great suffering on ourselves as well as on others? I think, first, because we often aren't aware of what's happening. We allow ourselves to be drawn into these destructive behaviors before we realize where we're heading. Therefore, we need to pray for awareness and discernment.

Sometimes we choose to continue in our destructive behavior because we feel we have a right—a right to be bitter, or lazy, or negative, a right to have a pity party. Just ask yourself: "Isn't life tough enough without making your own life tougher?"

When I find myself embroiled in this kind of self-destructive behavior, I try to catch myself, stop, and ask: "Why are you thinking of wrongs done to you? Why are you feeling sorry for yourself? Why are you focusing on negative things? Why are you refusing to be disciplined? Don't you realize what this is doing to you?" If you and I can just catch ourselves in this self-destructive behavior, we will make our own lives so much more pleasant and productive.

But a much higher motivation, and one that is far more important, is our privilege to be ambassadors for Jesus Christ in our world. When we get rid of these self-inflicted sufferings, we are freed up to be more like Jesus, more pleasing to him, a brighter light in a dark world.

Someday we'll stand before Jesus to give an account for how we lived our life here on earth. I don't want to hear that my life was not as effective as it could have been because I insisted on feeling sorry for myself, or being bitter, or being undisciplined, or staying negative. Remember, you can get rid of any of these any time you're willing to let God empower you to do what you need to do.