

Pastor Jeff Williams
November 29, 1998
"Road to Recovery" Part 8 – "Recycling My Pain"

Our goal is to help people-that's the goal of our church. If this series has been helpful for you, or you know somebody who this series would be helpful for and you're unable to afford to buy that tape album, we'll make sure that it gets to him or her. We'll make sure that you have that, so just let us know if there are any special needs in that area.

I hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving. I know I did. I thought maybe I needed to change the sermon title from "Recycling My Pain" to "The Sin of Gluttony." I don't know about you, but I had a good Thanksgiving.

This morning, we're going to talk about "Recycling My Pain," the last in our series on the Road to Recovery. There was a man who went into an office-he was the bank president. He was a young man-he was really making strides in the world of finance. There was a highly respected bank president who was leaving-he was retiring. He said, "This is my last chance to glean from this man," so he went into his office and said, "Look, I want to know before you go what is the key to your success. How have you been able to be so successful in business and finance?" The man put down his papers and took off his glasses, looked the young man in the eye and said, "Good decisions."

The man said, "Thank you. Thanks very much." He turned around to walk out the door, shut the door, and he had a question. He knocked again.

"Come in," the bank president said.

He opened up the door, and he said, "Yeah, I appreciate that advice, those two words, 'good decisions,' but how do you make good decisions. That's what I want to know. How do you do that?"

The bank president thought for a moment, and he said one word, "Experience."
The man said, "Oh, thanks. Thanks, sir. I appreciate your time today," and he turned and walked on, stopped again, turned back around, and he said, "One more thing. How do you get that experience?"

The bank president paused and said two words, "Bad decisions."
How do you become successful? Good decisions; How do you make good decisions?
Experience; How do you get experience? Through bad decisions.

You can take those bad decisions and those bad experiences and use them in a positive manner. That's what we're going to be talking about this morning-how we can use, how God can use, both those bad decisions we've made, those bad experiences we've had- and use them for our greater glitter, for the greater good, of those who come in contact with our lives.

Romans 8:28: I think Jason quoted that during the announcement or prayertime. It says that God causes all things to work together for those who love Him. It didn't say all things were good, but it says that God will use things that are bad and use them for our good in our lives.

Step Number 8...we've been using the word "Recovery" and taking each letter and having it stand for a step. This morning we come to the "Y" in Recovery, Step 8. That is to yield myself to God, to be used to bring the good news to others by both my example and my words. We're going to be talking about why God allows our pain and, secondly, how God can use our pain to help others this morning.

Mother Teresa once said, "The scripture says God will not give us more than we are able to

bear." She said, "I just wish he didn't trust me so much." Some of you might feel that way. "If God is only going to give me that which I can bear, I just wish he didn't trust me as much as He does, because He's sure given me a lot. He's sure given me a load to carry in my life."

I want to talk about why God allows pain in our lives. Why doesn't God just...He's God, He's all-powerful, why doesn't He just take pain from us, so we don't have to experience pain anymore? Several things. First of all, because God has made us to have free will. That's a risky thing that God did. He could have created human beings that bowed down and worshipped Him and loved Him no matter what, but you know love isn't really love until you have the ability to say, "I don't love you." And goodness isn't really goodness unless there's an opportunity to do wrong, right? So God made us with the ability to love or not love Him, to choose to do good or to choose to do bad. So, there is free will at stake. Many of the decisions that we make are based on the pain that we have in our lives from somebody using their free will. Either we used our free will to make decisions that had horrific consequences in our lives or somebody made decisions with their free will that had horrific consequences in our lives and caused us much pain.

We have been shocked by the story we heard in the news this week. We don't know all the circumstances, the whole situation, but a national news story right here in Janesville. A 15-year old girl with M.S. died of starvation, weighing only 15 pounds, on CNN-right here in our community. You hear a story like that, and you think, "Man, there are some horrific consequences." The young girl paid the consequences of suffering-and ultimately death-because of the negligence of a parent. The parent, because of her negligence, is paying the consequences-the distress, the shame and ultimately incarceration-because of that. Because she chose not to exercise her free will, not to get medical attention in time to save her daughter.

Consequences.

You hear a story like that...and I drove by that place just last night as we went out to get a bite to eat. I remember driving by because it said "Neighbor-Dunkin Donuts," and I looked at that house and said, "Right there, right there that little girl died in anonymity. Hardly anybody even knew she existed." I said, "Man, what a tragedy. Why couldn't that be stopped? Why couldn't that have been stopped?" But you know the dilemma, if God takes away this person's free will, so that they will never do wrong things or make wrong judgments, then God has to take away your free will. If God takes away your free will to stop you from doing evil, then you're not truly free. So that's the risk God took, and there is-with free will-great responsibility, a great blessing, but there was also great burden because free will works both ways. So much of the pain in our lives comes directly through free will.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, if you'd like to turn there in your Bibles, the repeating of the law in the Old Testament, page 152 if you have a church Bible handy. The church Bible is simply a copy of the NIV that we keep in our pews here. Some of our radio listeners have wondered what that is, "Do you have a special Bible or something?" No, we just have a copy of the Bible so we can all turn to the same place at the same time. In Deuteronomy 30:15, God is speaking to the children of Israel, and He says this about free will, "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction." God says that you have a choice. On this hand is life, and on this hand is prosperity, and on this side is death and prosperity. "For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commands, decrees, and His laws. Then you will live in increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if you turn your hearts away, and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the Lord is your life, and He will give you many years in the land he swore to give your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

The same truths hold to us today as held to the children of Israel. God says, "I said it before you. You have a choice which road you're going to go down." When we choose the wrong road, there are consequences to pay. Sometimes those consequences are very severe. But the Word of God always said it's not too late. We can make right choices. We can repent. We can choose to follow God instead of our own selfish desires. We can turn the course of our lives around. That's His promise.

Secondly, why does God allow pain? He uses pain to get my attention. God uses pain probably like nothing else to get our attention. Someone once said that God whispers to us in our joys, but He shouts to us in our pain. And isn't that true? Many of you sitting here today are here today because of pain. Pain drove you to your knees. You didn't see the light until you felt the heat, as we mentioned a couple weeks ago. It was that pain that drew you to a loving God. Pain is a friend. It sends us a warning signal. It says, "Something's wrong here. You better pay attention. You better stop." And if we didn't have pain in our bodies, as in Leprosy... You know those who have Leprosy have a dulling of the senses, and they don't feel pain like you and I do. As a result, they lose appendages and other parts of the body through infection. They don't know when something is hot; they don't know when they are around something that's sharp, so they are cut and hurt but do not know it because they don't feel pain. Pain is your friend, and if there's emotional pain, psychological pain, spiritual pain-pay attention to that. That's warning you that something is wrong. You need to do something about that. God is seeking to get your attention. Just as there are physical signals of pain, there are spiritual signals of pain.

In the Book of Jonah, Chapter 2:7, Jonah went the wrong way. He made a choice to run from God instead of run to God, and God gets his attention in the belly of a whale. He says, "When my life was ebbing away," when the pain was too great, Jonah said, "I remembered God and I prayed."

Thirdly, God allows pain to teach us to depend upon Him. I didn't say God was the source of pain. I didn't say God was the inflictor of pain. What I did say is God allows pain, why? To teach us to depend upon Him.

One pastor once said, "You don't know that God is all you need until He's all you've got." You don't know that God is all that you need until God is all you have.

The singing this morning talked about the blessing and the thorn from the Book of 2 Corinthians, Chapter 12. In 2 Corinthians, Chapter 12, page 864 in our church Bibles, Verses 9-10, Paul is praying to God, and he's saying, "God take this thorn in the flesh away from me. Remove this from me. It's inhibiting me. It's hurting me. It's making me uncomfortable, and I want it out of my life." Paul says he prayed three times that God would remove this thorn in the flesh. God's answer is in Verse 9, "But He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you for My power is made perfect in" what? "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. I delight in insults. I delight in hardships. I delight in persecutions. I delight in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Wow! That might be one of the most radical passages in scripture. How many people do you know that walk around today delighting in their weaknesses, delighting in their persecutions, delighting in their sorrows? We often think that God's going to use us and use our strengths. When we think of God using us, we usually in a mental picture see God using our strengths. But more often than not in scripture, what God used was our weaknesses. See, that's when He gets the glory. He uses our weaknesses. He uses our frailties.

Share a strength, built a resentment. You notice that? Share a strength, build a resentment. People think, "Well, you're just trying to show you're better than me, that I'm inferior to you." Or they might take it competitively. You share a strength, they say, "Oh yeah. I'll one up ya." And

they talk about their strength or how their strength surpasses your strength in a specific area. Or share a strength, and they go, "You're conceited." But share a weakness, and you build a bridge. Share a weakness and a person says, "Well, I can relate to that." Share a weakness, and somebody says, "Well, that helps me to see how you've come through that." Share a weakness, and somebody says, "Oh, I can relate to that. Let me share mine with you." And you build a bridge.

Isn't it amazing that in the Bible when it talks about being strong, we must first admit that we're weak? Isn't it amazing that when it talks about being successful in the Bible, you must admit first of all that you are a moral failure? Isn't that something?

Some people have said, "Well, you know, I don't care about that Christianity thing. That's just a crutch some people need to get through life. That's all religion is; it's just a crutch. You need a crutch, then go ahead and have religion, but I don't need that."

You know what I would say to a person that said that? I'd say, "You know what? I don't need a crutch either. I need a stretcher." I don't need a crutch either. A crutch implies that with a little bit of health, with something resting under my arm, I can make it. I can get by. A stretcher implies you need somebody to carry you. You are so incapacitated that you cannot even carry yourself. You need total assistance from somebody else. I said, "That's me. I am a morally bankrupt man." And if we're going to be honest, you are a morally bankrupt person. You can't go a day without sinning. You can't go one day on this planet without having a wrong thought, a wrong deed, a wrong desire, not one day. You and I are morally bankrupt, and we don't need a crutch. We need a stretcher. We need somebody who can pick us up and carry us where we want to go, and that's a Savior-that's Jesus. He will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

So, that's the key. The Bible says if you want to see, you must confess first of all that you are blind. He told the Pharisees that. "Because you say you see, your sin remains, but if you would say, 'I don't see,' you will be healed." That's an important point for us to understand. Secondly, this morning, we want to talk not only about why God allows pain in our lives, but I want to talk about how God can use that pain. That's where the Recycling comes in. Every week, we do what? We take out the trash. We take out the trash, we put in our paper, our cans, and our jars, and we say to the city, "Recycle these. Take this garbage and take this trash and use it to help society in some way." That's a big thing in our house. I'm kind of like the recycling police in our home. Occasionally, I will see that my wife has committed "Recycling Sin." I will look in the general trash, and I will see a glass jar, or I will see a can, and I will say, "SIN!" Or I'll see a newspaper in there, "Double sin!" Usually I pick them up, but occasionally I miss, and we get little write-ups. Our recycling guy's name is Tom, and he literally writes little green or yellow pieces of paper and puts them on our bin that say, "Will you please remember to do that?" I'll come in the house all disgusted, "Well, we got another note from Tom. Boy! You put a recyclable in the garbage!" And I'll show it to her. But you know what happens if you don't take out the trash? Pretty soon, things start to smell bad, right? I don't have a lot of jobs in our home, but one of them is to take out the trash every week, and if there's ever a Tuesday morning I forget, I'm in big trouble. I'm in big trouble. We have to keep the garage door up all week because the trash smells.

So that's what we're talking about, taking out the trash, recycling those bad experiences, negative experiences. God can use those to help us to make us stronger-integrity-to draw us closer to Him, but also, He can use them to comfort others as well.

In the Book of 2 Corinthians, I hadn't planned on sharing this, but I think I will. Second Corinthians, Chapter 1:3, it says, "Praise be to the God and Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." You see that passage? Wow! You know that you are on the road to recovery when you find yourself investing in the lives of other people. You will know that you are truly being healed and truly

recycling your pain when you find yourself sharing a pain, or a heartache, or a failure to help somebody else. When you come to the point where you are able to take your eyes off of yourself and put them on somebody else and help that person in their situation, you will know that you are well on your road to recovery. You will know that when you see that begin to happen. God wants us, and this is the truth, God wants you and I to be elbow deep in the pain of other people. Did you know that? He doesn't want us to just experience our pain and then keep to ourselves what we've learned and how we've grown.

An executive from IBM, this is a true story by the way, was in charge of a great deal of that company's assets. He made a blunder, a costly blunder. He lost IBM an estimated \$10 million in profit. Ten million dollars in profit! More than Michael Jordan earns in...a month. That's a lot of money! So when he found out what he had done, he was so full of shame and so full of disgrace, he could barely look at his boss. Have you ever been there? You've been there, right? You know you've done something wrong, and there's no covering up-there's no denying it. You've got to go face the music, and you feel about this tall. You walk into the principal's office, the teacher's office, your boss's office, or your spouse, and you have your head down, your tail between your legs. You're just taking this posture of humility. What a scum I am, you know that kind of posture. So, he walked into his boss's office, the head of IBM, and he says, "You know I cost the company \$10 million, right?"

He says, "Yeah, yeah you did."

He says, "Well, it goes without saying. Here's my letter of resignation." He handed it to the president, and he said, "I'm really sorry. I'm really sorry for my mistake."

Without blinking an eye, the president took that letter of resignation, handed it back to him and said, "Young man, I have invested \$10 million in you. There's no way you're going to walk out of here. I'm going to get my money's worth. You're going to stay." He said, "You're going to be of more value to this company now that you've experienced this. You're going to be able to pass that wisdom on from that \$10 million mistake to other executives that have come down the pike. There's no way we're going to let you go. I'm going to get my money's worth. I'm not going to waste that \$10 million."

And some of you in your lives have made \$10 million mistakes. You've made some dousies, and you think, "That's it. God's done with me. God's going to erase my name from the book of life. He's through with me." And what you find in the Scriptures is that God says to you, "I'm not going to waste that. I'm not going to waste that knowledge. I'm not going to waste that experience. I want you to use that mistake to help somebody else from repeating that same thing." In the Book of Galatians, let's read together, Galatians 6, page 868, Paul writing to the church in Galatia, and he's giving some instructions-what you might call intervention. He's telling Christians that he wants them to be involved in other Christians' lives. We're going to read Galatians 6:1-5 together, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." What does it mean "you who are spiritual?" Does that mean a conceited thing? "Those of you who are really close to God..." No, Paul is saying, "Those of you who understand these principles of spirituality that I've been talking about. Those of you who have an understanding, a foothold, on what it means to restore, you should restore him," how? Gently. "But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to someone else, for each one of you should carry his own load."

Now, before we talk about this test, just a little bit of commentary. There are two commands here, which almost seem like redundant or contradictory. Verse 2, he says "carry each other's burdens," and in Verse 5, he says "for each one should carry his own load." You might read that and say, "Well, which is it, Paul?" Do I carry mine or do I carry his? It's really important for us to understand there are two different words in play here. One, in Verse 2, is the word "burden,"

which is in the Greek meant like a boulder or something that was too heavy for us to carry ourselves. It's something out of the ordinary. It's a circumstance that comes upon us that if we don't get help, it's going to crush us. The second word is in Verse 5 where it talks about "load," which was a word used for a knapsack-to carry your daily provisions. That meant the day-to-day responsibilities that all of us have. Nobody should ask us to care for his or her day-to-day responsibilities. That's their codependency-when I begin to care for things that you should care for yourself. That's one of the signs of codependency. We're building a dependency that's not healthy. When somebody is depending on me on functions that they can and should perform for themselves, that's our daily load. But there is in life, something different, and that is a burden. That is something that comes upon you. It could be a loss or a death or a sickness or something else that comes upon you that will overtake you unless you have support. Paul says, "That is the Christian's job. If you're not helping the people that are in your life to carry the burdens, you are not fulfilling the law of Christ." If you are not elbow deep, helping people with their pain, sharing your story of how God helped you, you are missing out on that \$10 million help. Like that guy that lost \$10 million at IBM, you've made \$10 million mistakes, and other people need to learn from them. Paul says, "If you're not helping them bare those burdens, if you're not teaching them what you've learned, show them how to avoid that mistake, helping them to lift that boulder." Paul says, "You're not fulfilling the law of Christ."

There are three things in how to help others here in this passage, and it's interwoven; it's almost hard to point out a verse because they are kind of interwoven together.

Paul talks about humility. When you go to help somebody, he says, "It's important to have a humble spirit." He says, "First of all you restore in gentleness, not in haughtiness-in gentleness." He says, "Watch out for yourself that you might be tempted." In other words, don't go in there thinking you are above this temptation or you're above this sin, but come in with humility. Notice he says here, "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself." If anybody goes into a situation like this, where somebody is having a problem with sin, and you go in to intervene in that situation and think you're all that, Paul says, "You're only deceiving yourself."

He says, "Secondly, be real." He says, "Each one should test his own actions, look at yourself in the mirror first," Paul says. "Be authentic and be honest."

Wednesday night, we had some Thanksgiving testimonies. We took the whole Wednesday night, and we just gave testimonies, thanking God for what he has done for us in the last year. A couple of the people shared some really painful things and some really hurtful things, experiences they've been through. One shared something that was really embarrassing to her, but she got up and shared it with the congregation to help the congregation. I was talking with one of our people after the service, and she said, "That's why I'm at this church. That's why I'm here because it's real." We want people to be real. We want people to be able to be themselves, be able to share their frailties and their shortcomings and still be loved and accepted, and realize that we're all in the same boat.

The third thing I can glean from this passage is I get the feeling that Paul is saying, "Don't lecture." Don't lecture. Test your own actions without comparing himself to somebody else. You never argue somebody into the Kingdom of God, friends. You will never argue somebody into the Kingdom of God. You will never argue somebody into repentance. You will push them away. I remember doing an intervention with a friend. We all gathered around, and I would think we were really making some headway, really making some progress in this brother's life. We were sharing about the compassion of Christ, and the forgiveness of Christ, and the danger of free will-when we make wrong choices. This happened to be an addiction case. You know when you experiment with drugs, and that experimentation of drugs leads to addiction, your choice has brought these consequences on you, and your choices can turn things around. I thought we were really getting through, and as soon as we would get through, then another guy who was there would chime in. It was the brother, and he'd say, "Let me tell you something. I worked at his same

job for 30 years, and I did this, and I don't do that, and you do. And da da da da da da." And all the progress we made was just flushed down the commode, just that fast. And those two would start arguing and fighting again, and I'd say, "Oh man! Who invited him?" This is a life and death struggle here, and then I would share, I would try to be real nice and say, "You know, I appreciate what he had to say, but I don't think this is all about pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. This is about yielding to God and letting God control your life." And then I would share a scripture or a testimony, and somebody else would share, and then he would come right back in and say, "You know what? Mom and Dad would have turned over in their graves if they would have known..." And I'm not saying there is not a time for confrontation, but he was lecturing and demeaning this man by comparing him to himself and saying, "Look how much better I am than you because of what I have done, and I don't do what you do." And progress would, once again, be washed away.

Paul says, "When you have to confront somebody who is in need of recovery, do so in a spirit of gentleness. Don't have a lofty spirit. Know that you are vulnerable to the same kinds of temptations and correct them in a spirit of gentleness and love."

There's a story about a man who I'd like to tell about this morning. This is a man who we talked about being elbow deep in other's lives and helping them bear their pain. This is a man who sought to avoid that his whole life. He saw people love each other, and he saw how love made strenuous demands on the lovers. He saw love required sacrifice and self-denial. He saw love produce arguments and anguish, and he decided that it cost too much, and he decided not to diminish his life with love. He saw people strive for distant and hazy goals. He saw men strive for success and women strive for high, high ideals, and he saw that the striving was frequently mixed with disappointment. He saw the strong men fail, and he saw it force people into pettiness. He saw those who succeeded were sometimes those who had not earned the success. He decided that it cost too much, and he decided not to soil his life with striving. He saw people serving others. He saw men give money to the poor and helpless. He saw that the more they served, the faster the need grew. He saw ungrateful receivers turn on their serving friends, and he decided not to soil his life with serving. When he died, he walked up to God and presented Him with his life, undiminished, unmarred, unsoiled. His life was clean from the filth of the world, and he presented it proudly, saying, "This is my life." And the Great God said, "What life?" He spent his whole life protecting that heart, as we saw in the drama, so that no one would bruise it, no one would crush it, didn't want to take the risk, and God says, "What have you done? You have squandered the greatest gift that you could have, and that is to invest your life in humanity. Invest your life in the building up of someone else who is in pain."

"What life?" God said.

I pray that if you take away anything from this series that we've been on these last eight weeks, it's the importance of trusting God, giving God that pain as we saw in that drama, allowing God to turn that thorn into a rose-giving Him that pain. Trust God, and your sins are forgiven. Trust God, and your present is manageable. Trust God, and your future is secure. Pastor Rick Warren said that.

Would you join me in prayer?

Father in Heaven, we are grateful for the truths of Your Word that we have studied these last two months together. It is my prayer that all of us are much more aware of our own frailties and weaknesses and what to do about them. We're aware of our character defects and our strengths. We are aware of Your presence. In that passage in Deuteronomy, when You set before them life and death, it was very clear that it was Your desire that we choose life. And those of us who are on the crossroads in this Road to Recovery, we have a choice of doing things our way or Your way. We have a choice of walking down the road that we determined. The scripture says there's a way which seems right to a man, but therein, thereof is the way of death. We have a choice to follow these principles that You've laid in Your word. It's my prayer that we will choose life and not

death, that we will choose blessing and not curse, that we will choose prosperity and not destruction. Lord, as all of us have experienced the pain of life, might we recycle that pain. Might You use the pain of our hearts to be a blessing to somebody else. Might we be busy with the business of humanity and not so caught up in our own lives that we don't see the pain around us, and we waste the things that we learn-we waste the things that pain has taught us by keeping them to ourselves. I pray that you would take each person here and make them a missionary-send them out that they might share these principles and these truths with all who need them. These folks can reach people that I will never reach, Lord, and once they've reached them, they have a safe place to bring them here where they can hear of Your grace and Your compassion and Your mercy. I pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.