

Psychopathology or Sin?

By
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For decades, modern culture has struggled to define and categorize psychological and/or psychiatric conditions. Experts have created hundreds of diagnostic categories that attempt to isolate and classify specific conditions or illnesses so that they can be effectively treated. This has given rise to the term *psychopathology*, which refers to an *illness or dysfunction* in the *psyche or mind* of an individual.

Medical doctors tend to see the disturbance as *organic*; Behaviorists often describe the issue as a *learned or conditioned dysfunction*; Psychoanalysts believe psychological problems are due to *parental failures, disappointments, and frustrated psychosexual development*; Family Therapists view emotional disturbance as a consequence of *unhealthy family structure*.

But even with all of this debate, professionals still cannot agree regarding the definition, cause, and cure for psychological maladies like depression, phobias, anxiety, addiction, attention deficit disorder, etc. Ask ten *mental health professionals* and you might well receive ten diagnoses, ten treatment plans, and ten different outcomes. In short, there is still great confusion about why an individual feels and does what he/she does not wish to feel or do.

But long before Sigmund Freud, B.F. Skinner, Albert Ellis, and Virginia Satir, the apostle Paul was debating the same predicament. He wrote:

For what I am doing I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do (Romans 7:15).

Here Paul describes the human state of sin. He further makes it clear that in spite of his best *human attempts*, he is unable to change his basic nature. Paul continues:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me (Romans 7:18-20).

Clearly Paul defines sin as the *problem*. He further makes it clear that the source of his problem is his own *flesh, mind, and heart*. He doesn't point to a medical condition, although he had some (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), as the *cause* of his unwanted behavior. Paul didn't highlight his parents (Acts 22:3), his culture (Acts 22:27-28), or even the trauma (2 Corinthians 11:25) and mistreatment he endured as *reason or explanation* for his unsettling conduct. No, Paul knew that

his human frame was corrupt and sinful. He also knew that he could not change himself.

Jesus spoke of the condition of man's heart as the source of all sinful and thereby, unhealthy conduct, emotion, thoughts, and desires: He said:

What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness (Mark 7:20-22).

Truly, most *psychological illnesses and mental diagnoses* can be found in the list Jesus provides in this one passage. And when other passages are considered that pertain to the *works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21)*, *acts of unrighteousness (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)*, and the nature of a *debased mind (Romans 1:28-31)*, we begin to see the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in full form. God defined *psychopathology* long before psychiatrists and other therapists were even in existence. God simply called it sin.

Does this mean there are no *biological conditions* that produce psychiatric symptoms? Are we saying that *family, abuse, poverty, and other trauma* have no affect on an individual? Not necessarily...

But biblical truth is clear that sin is the core issue that defiles, misleads, distorts, and destroys. And according to Brandt and Skinner (1998), if sin is the problem:

- *There is no human remedy for sin...*
- *The only cure for sin is in Christ...*

As Biblical Counselors we must begin with the core truth, defined in Scripture, and not allow ourselves to be misdirected into the psychological waters of speculation. There is a great deal that is *unknown* about the organic and mental elements of life. But biblically we know *volumes* about the sin of humans and the redemptive, cleansing, mercy, restoration, and empowerment of Christ. In any other scientific debate, the issue would be closed.

References:

Brandt, H. and Skinner, K. (1998). *The Heart of the Problem Workbook*, Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.