

I remember a story from my youth of a boy who became a hero by sticking his finger in a leaking dike; in doing this, he kept his community from becoming flooded, thus saving many lives and homes. I don't really remember any details, and I couldn't find the source of this story, but it made an impression on me long ago. Now, though, I wonder if he just had to stay there forever. Perhaps that's all he could do for the rest of his life, to stand there and plug that leak. Nowadays we could add an environmental flavor to the story. Let's pretend that the liquid that was being held back was not just water, but a terrible poison. Think of how much more important it would be to keep the dike from leaking.

The pressure of the fluid would make it difficult to heal the break from the outside. There would have to be something done to the inside to stop the leak. We have all probably experienced this kind of problem before. Maybe it was a pipe underneath the sink that you tried to seal with duct tape, or window joint that allowed the rain to seep through. Perhaps it was an exhaust problem like the one that I had with an old car years ago.

It all began when the exhaust manifold cracked and began to leak noxious fumes. I took the car to a service station, the part they put in was made for a single exhaust and my car had dual exhausts. The service people told me that there was no problem, that the muffler shop up the road could fix me right up. So I paid my bill and thanked them.

When I got to the muffler shop, however, they looked at me like they thought I was crazy. I had to go to the junkyard and find a piece for them to put the exhaust system back together. After a long search, I finally found something that was marginally acceptable. They said that I would probably still have a small exhaust leak. Well, they were certainly right about that.

My son nearly refused to ride in such a 'smelly' car. I think that he was concerned about being poisoned, too, so I tried to seal it up myself. Duct tape was not even a consideration for use at these high temperatures. But the auto parts places had a special epoxy that were supposed to work for just this type of problem. It never mentioned on the label, though, that as the substance was cured by the hot exhaust components, it stank even worse than the exhaust. And, of course, it didn't really work, either. I finally reached my limit of frustration with that car and sold it. I liked the car, but I had to get away from it before I became really sick.

Sometimes we live in a social environment that is also spewing out poisons. Those around us splatter us with slander, oppression, and hatefulness. It never seems to stop, like the slow burning description of hell: "where the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:48)". Living around these people is like living around toxic waste, and we are at risk of slow poisoning to death. I think of those who lived around Love Canal in New Jersey, or the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl. These families had no choice to but get away or die.

Where does forgiveness enter into this picture? It is a troubling problem for me. If someone offends me, and asks me for forgiveness, Christ can help me to accomplish that. But how do you forgive someone that never stops hurting you, and never even tries to stop? This is not like having our sewer overflow once in a while. How do you forgive the crack in the pipe that keeps on leaking, spewing filth and killing the earth? I don't think you can just get used to it like those who live near a paper factory. You just have to get away from it if you can.

David had this type of relationship with Saul. Saul's evil spirit leaked out on David fairly regularly, and it made David's life miserable. Saul would try to patch himself up, but soon the leaks would begin again. David did not condemn him, as he respected the Lord's anointed, but he finally had to leave. Passive 'forgiveness' would have only gotten him killed. He knew that the only solution to the problem was enough distance to keep Saul from hunting him down.

Sometimes no one else sees or is affected by the poison that is threatening us. In our effort to forgive, we need to know that someone is held accountable for what they are doing. We know (Romans 14:12) that each one of us will give an account of himself to God. We must leave it to God to sort things out.

We are indeed sinners, and in our own way we have various leaks in our souls. But it is like we have our hands clasped on the leak as tight as we can to try to minimize the damage (see Romans 7) as we cry out to God for help. We cannot heal ourselves, for there always seems to be that frustrating drop that keeps oozing out. Only God can heal us by working on our hearts from the inside. Let's make sure we invite Him in every day to do the work!

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