

Playing the “If Only” Game

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I remember talking years ago with a young mother who had a two-year-old child and one-year-old twins. She said with a sigh, “I was never an impatient person—until I had these twins!”

This lady believed what most of us have believed at one time or another—that we are the way we are because of our circumstances.

The implication is that our circumstances make us what we are. Perhaps you’ve found yourself saying, as have I, “She made me so mad!” What we are saying is: “I am really a kind, gentle, loving, self-controlled, Spirit-filled woman. But . . . you can’t believe what she did!”

“I wouldn’t have lost my cool,” we insist, “if my child hadn’t filled the dryer with water and painted the living room furniture with butter!”

Or, “I wouldn’t struggle in my marriage if my parents hadn’t verbally abused me and made me feel worthless.”

Or, “I wouldn’t be so bitter if my husband hadn’t run off with that other woman.”

We are saying, “Someone or something made me the way I am.” We feel that if our circumstances were different—our upbringing, our environment, the people around us—we would be different. We would be more patient, more loving, more consistent, easier to live with.

If our circumstances make us what we are, then we are all victims. And that’s just what the enemy wants us to believe. Because if we are victims, then we aren’t responsible—we can’t help the way we are.

But God says we are responsible—not for the failures of others, but for our own responses and lives.

The “If Only” Game

The truth is our circumstances do not make us what we are. They merely reveal what we are.

That exasperated mother who believed she had never been an impatient person until she had twins did not understand that she had always been an impatient person; she just didn't realize how impatient she was until God brought a set of circumstances into her life to show her what she was really like—so He could change her.

The enemy convinces us that the only way we can ever be different is if our circumstances change. So we play the “if only” game: If only we didn't have to move . . . If only we lived closer to my parents . . . If only we had a bigger house (more closets, more storage) . . . If only we had more money . . . If only my husband didn't have to work so many hours . . . If only I were married . . . If only I weren't married . . . If only I were married to someone different . . . If only I had children . . . If only I didn't have so many children . . . If only I hadn't lost that child . . . If only my husband would communicate . . . If only my husband were a spiritual leader . . .

We have been deceived into believing we would be happier if we had a different set of circumstances. The truth is if we are not content within our present circumstances, we are not likely to be happy in any other set of circumstances.

When she was in her fifties, nineteenth-century writer Elizabeth Prentiss learned that her husband would be taking a new job that required them to uproot from their home in New York and move to Chicago. The move meant leaving all their friends and posed a danger to her fragile health. In a letter to a friend, she wrote:

We want to know no will but God's in this question. . . . The experience of the past winter would impress upon me the fact that place and position have next to nothing to do with happiness; that we can be wretched in a palace, radiant in a dungeon . . . perhaps this heartbreaking is exactly what we need to remind us . . . that we are pilgrims and strangers on the earth.¹

George Washington's wife, Martha, expressed the same conviction in a letter written to her friend Mercy Warren:

I am still determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may be; for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other about with us in our minds, wherever we go.²

Learning to be Content

The apostle Paul learned that he could rejoice and be content and fruitful in any circumstance because his joy and well-being were not dependent on his circumstances but on the steadfast love and faithfulness of God and the conditions of his relationship with God. He wrote, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (Phil. 4:11–12).

Paul understood that we may not be able to control our circumstances, but our circumstances don't have to control us.

The truth is that we can trust a wise, loving, sovereign God to control every circumstance of our lives.

Joy, peace, and stability come from believing that every circumstance that touches our lives has first been filtered through His fingers of love and is part of a great, eternal plan that He is working out in this world and in our lives.

1 George Lewis Prentiss, *More Love to Thee: The Life and Letters of Elizabeth Prentiss* (Amityville, N.Y.: Calvary, 1994), 374.

2 Harry C. Green and Mary W. Green, "The Pioneer Mothers of America," 1912, cited in *The Christian History of the American Revolution: Consider and Ponder*, comp. Verna M. Hall (San Francisco: Foundation of American Christian Education, 1988), 76.

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