

Alcoholism in the family / How God sees you

Marj: I've been talking with Julia. She's a grown woman, a relative of my husband, and she told me how alcohol affected her life when she was a child. I really felt like crying. Maybe you'll understand why when you hear her story.

Tammy: Hello, and welcome to Women of Hope. I'm Tammy, and Carol and Marj are here too. Marj will tell us more of Julia's story.

Marj: Julia's mother became pregnant with her while she was not married. She moved with her beautiful dark haired baby daughter to a different country town, far away. She told people that her husband had died. It wasn't long before she married a man. She wanted someone to look after her and her baby. However, he was an alcoholic. He would spend hours drinking beer in the hotel bar, then noisily stagger home at night, where he would beat up his wife and children. They were all terrified of him.

Julia had tears streaming down her face as she told how her mother would gather up the children late at night, get them up from their warm beds and make them run down the cold streets to sleep at a friend's house, where they would be safe.

Something stirred in my memory at that. I lived in that same small town - and then I remembered! Often as I was drifting off to sleep I would hear the sound of several running feet out in the street and wonder who was out so late at night on such a cold night. Now I knew. One of those running children was Julia.

This memory had haunted Julia all her life. It made her feel that she was not wanted. In her late teens, she heard how God loved her. She gave her life to God and from then on she found comfort in telling Him about her problems and fears and asking Him for His help.

Carol: Thank you for that story Marj. Today we'd like to look at that common problem of drunkenness in the family. I expect we'll get some ideas about how to cope in this situation, from our counselor friend, Fran. Hi Fran.

Fran: Hi Carol, and Tammy; hi Marj, and hello to you, my friend. I wonder whether someone in your family drinks too much alcohol. It could be a man or a woman, a young person or an older one. Maybe it's you! You'll already know that alcohol affects the whole family, not just the drinker. My father-in-law was a nice man, but an alcoholic, and his wife and children were all affected by that.

Carol: The whole community pays the cost of alcohol abuse. It's one of the biggest health problems in the world, and one of the biggest social problems.

Tammy: That's right. Problem drinkers often can't get to work, they waste money on drink, have more accidents, get sick more often. And when they're drunk they often do things that they really regret afterwards.

Fran: Drinking too much alcohol every day can cause a serious addiction, just like heroin or other drugs; alcoholics really feel they *need* the drink. But it causes damage to their brains that can't be mended.

Carol: We need to realize that the problem of alcohol affects the entire *family*. Each family member

becomes involved at some level.

Fran: If one person in the family seems weak, with a drinking problem, others think they have to be strong, and look after the drinker and the family. But this doesn't encourage the drinker to change- in fact, it lets them stay the same, or they feel guilty and weak. So they drink to feel better!

Think about an imaginary family. One family member drinks too much- we'll call him Joseph. The rest of them are caught up in the emotions and problems that result. Grandma wants to protect Joseph, Uncle wants to punish him. Joseph's wife tries nagging, criticizing or pleading with him to stop, while the children just want to escape the situation.

His brother wants to tell Joseph how he really feels about what Joseph is doing, but other family members stop him, because they're too scared there will be a fight in the family. They try to keep the drinking a secret, and they feel ashamed and lonely as well as angry and afraid. Joseph's sister gives him money and goes to the bar to bring him home each night. She doesn't want Joseph to suffer.

Does this sound like your family, or a family you know? But you know, it's the *suffering* that could make Joseph realize that he really needs to turn his life around. Are his family showing Joseph love by helping him stay addicted? Are they showing love to those who he hurts?

Carol: So what you are saying is that none of the things they were doing for Joseph really helped to bring change. Often when families do these things they let the problem drinker stay the same. Alcoholics are actually addicted, so usually they won't try to change until they realize they *can't* stay the same.

Tammy: I know a woman who drinks too much every day, but she says she's not an alcoholic, and her husband makes excuses for her behavior.

Fran: We call that *denial*- pretending it's not happening, or not important. If this is happening in your family, you need to *admit* that you are living with an alcoholic and that it *is* a problem. But don't carry the guilt and shame; the alcoholic's disease and actions are not your fault. You can't change how they act. But you might need to stop helping them to stay the way they are.

Carol: Can you give us an example Fran?

Fran: Well, stop pretending that everything is OK. When the person *isn't* drunk, talk with them about how you feel about their drinking, and how it affects you. Be honest about your feelings, but speak with respect. Don't threaten, or bribe, or get too emotional. That will just make them feel angry or guilty and they'll probably want to drink to get rid of that feeling.

Tammy: I talked to a woman who used to be an alcoholic. Her name is Diane. Now she works with families with alcohol problems. She said:

'This is the most important thing for you to do: stop protecting them from the natural results of their drinking. If they embarrass themselves, don't make excuses. If they are drunk on the floor, don't pick them up. If they don't show up for work, do not call their boss and lie. Do not bail them out of trouble if they're caught drinking and driving. When their bills are late, don't pay on behalf of the alcoholic who won't work. Don't do things for them that they can do for themselves. Only get involved if there is a danger of them being severely injured.'

Carol: You have to understand that she was not being mean. Diane was saying 'When I got drunk I *needed* to feel the penalty of my drinking.' This might be really hard for you; but why would they want to stop drinking if there are no penalties for it?

Fran: Exactly. This is often called 'tough love'. It is tough, but it's also loving, because it will help them in the long run. You should do it in a compassionate way, not a punishing way. You might say, 'I love you, and because of that I won't give you money to get drunk.' It's important not to give in for the sake of peace and quiet.

Tammy: But what happens if you stop doing these things that you have done for years, when you thought you were helping them.

Fran: Things might get worse at first. But ask yourself: 'Have those things really helped?' No-one can cause another person's addiction; or make them stop. The simple answer is: 'Let go of trying to heal them, and let God heal you first.' Allow all the hurt and pain to be healed in your own heart first.

Tammy: So where do we start, if we want to make changes? Because, as you said, you can't force someone to give up drinking.

Fran: This might sound strange, but you can really only start with yourself, you and God together. Remember that God loves you, and he loves the alcoholic. Ask God to make you feel strong and safe because *he* cares for you. Ask *him* to show you what to do each day, to protect you and the family, and help this person to change. Decide to pray for this person, to love and serve them, but not to help them stay addicted. You can start today to make some changes.

The next step is to take care of yourself and any children you have. I know that sounds selfish and it might be hard but it really works. When you start taking care of yourself, you take the focus off of the addiction and put it on the rest of the family. You could give all your energy to the addiction; learning about addiction, trying to keep the peace, worrying about the future, trying to influence the person. You might choose to do this willingly and lovingly, or just because you're desperate... but you might lose your own physical and mental health. When 'helping' seems to leave little time for anything else, the result is quite often 'burnout'. You can feel exhausted, frustrated, angry... helpless, and hopeless.

How can you protect yourself from burn-out? You need to make time in your day to attend to your *own needs*. *It's just as important* as caring for others. If you don't, after a while you won't be *able* to care for others. What do we really need to do to be healthy in our bodies and minds?

Carol: Well, the things we all need; exercise, good food, sleep, friends to talk to, work that's useful...

Tammy: ... time alone, time with friends, time for your interests... You might need to get medical care. You don't have to do this alone. Get some help from a trusted friend, pastor, counselor or even a support group. It might feel selfish to say your own needs are important. But you must take care of yourself- that's being responsible.

Carol: OK. So what have we heard today about coping with a problem drinker in the family? We should stop pretending about the problem, and tell the truth to ourselves, and to them.

Tammy: We should stop rescuing them from the natural results of their drinking, so they will learn

what it really costs, and realize they need to change.

Carol: Yes, and we shouldn't feel responsible for making them change. Ask God to work in their life, get some help from someone you trust, and look after yourself and others in your family.

Fran: Welcome back to Women of Hope. I read a story about a woman who was very poor. She didn't know who her real parents were, and she had a very hard life. But one day, she received a letter. It said she actually belonged to a wealthy, powerful family, and would inherit a lot of money. It said she could ask for money any time she needed it. It said she could visit the family home any time, and the family would welcome her. 'That's nice', she thought as she set the letter aside among the clutter of her life. It got mixed up with all the bills and papers on her table. She still thought of herself as a poor woman. She simply could not picture herself with that family's name and that kind of wealth and inheritance, so she continued on in her poor hut, living the same way day after day after day.

Carol: That sounds like a parable to me!

Fran: I guess it is- a story with a spiritual meaning. Surely anyone who got a letter like that would claim her true identity!

Carol: It's important to know your identity- who you really are. It's important to me to know what family I come from, where I belong, what sort of person I am, what skills I have. If I asked you who you are, what would you say first? That would be your identity.

Fran: This story does have a spiritual meaning. God loves us all, of course, and values us. But when we turn to God and put our trust in Jesus Christ, God gives us a new identity. He says that we become the children of the living God. We can share all of His love and power. Yet, even as followers of Jesus, often we continue to see ourselves in the old way, stuck in our old habits, stuck in our circumstances, just as the poor woman did. We don't live as children of God, the king of the universe! Do you want to change the way you see yourself? First you need to understand how *God* sees you; who you really are! When you say 'yes' to God, you have a new identity as God's loved child. But just *knowing* that will not make much difference until you begin to put God's Word into practice. When you begin to understand all that your new identity means, you begin to live like the person that God says you are.

Often we learn to become what other people say we are; clever, pretty, talented, or useless, stupid, ugly, a drunk, not worthy, a helpless victim. We see ourselves as others see us, and then we *become* the kind of people that they expect us to be.

But listen to the truth! You are God's treasured child! You do not get your identity from what you have done, or from what has been done to you. You do not get your identity from what people have said to you or about you! Those things may have influenced your past but today is a new day for you as God's child! You can become the person he says you are.

Tammy: That's so true! You should get your identity from what *God* says about you! He is your Father. He created you. He knows all you can be! And He is like no Father on earth! Today, why don't you begin to change the way you see yourself? Stop thinking of yourself as a person who is not worth much, and start living as the woman you are because of Jesus. Don't be like the poor woman in our story. Accept the identity that God is offering you.

Carol: You know, the early followers of Jesus were just ordinary people. Some of them were even slaves. Some of them were not good or respectable people at all, when they first heard about Jesus. But they turned to God, and they trusted Jesus to wash away their sins. They found that they could have a new identity and a new start. But they were like us, they didn't always understand just what that meant. So their leaders wrote to them to keep reminding them. Those letters are in the Bible. Listen to what God inspired them to write. We're going to take turns to read them to you.

Tammy: God loves you- loves you so much that he sent his own Son Jesus to save you. (John 3:16)

Fran: God *chose* to *adopt* us as his children through Jesus Christ- this was his will and pleasure. (Ephesians 1:5)

Tammy: Jesus said he calls you his *friend!* (John 15:15)

Carol: As a believer in Jesus, you have been given God's *Holy Spirit*, like God's stamp that you belong to him. (Eph 1:13)

Fran: You were *forgiven*. (Colossians. 1:14)

Carol: You were *washed*, you were *made holy*, you were made *right with God* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1Cor 6:11)

Tammy: God's power has given you everything you need to live a godly life, through knowing him. (2 Peter 1:3)

Carol: You can be sure that God has started a good work in your heart, and he will complete it! (Philippians 1:6)

Fran: If you're a follower of Jesus, those wonderful words are God's message to you personally. When life gets tough, when people hurt you, and you begin to feel defeated, remember who you really are! Learn how to take those feelings and thoughts to God in prayer. Remind yourself of what *God* says about you! So what is your identity Tammy? Who are you?

Tammy: I am God's daughter, whom he loves! I'm really somebody! So I pray that he will help me to *live* like his daughter each day. Would you pray with me?

Father God, Thank you that you created us in your image and we are precious and important in your sight! Help us today to really believe this and to live in our new identity as your loved children!

I pray especially for my friend who has problems in the family because of alcohol and other addictions. Please help all those who are hurt by this problem. Please help the problem drinker. Help my friend to be wise, loving and strong, and to put her trust in you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Carol: We'll be back again next time to talk some more about alcohol addiction and how to get free. So please join us then, whether you have an alcohol problem or you would like to be able to help

Fran: Good bye.