

What is Pain?



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Alice: I'm Alice Mathews.

Karen: And I'm Karen Mason.

Alice: And Karen and I happen to be daughter and mother.

Karen: Hi, Mom.

Alice: Hi, Karen. But more important than that I think for our purposes today is that we are also colleagues.

Karen: We both have taught courses on ministering to women in pain at the seminary level, and I'm also a licensed psychologist so I work a lot professionally with people who are in pain.

Alice: One of the things, of course, that comes up when we have a course on ministering to people in pain, the first question is, "What is pain?" And I found, as I was Googling various answers, that some of the definitions of pain seemed pretty hard to follow, hard but very professional. Let me read one of them for you from the International Association for the Study of Pain. They said that, "Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage." Karen, that's quite a mouthful.

Karen: That's a mouthful. Yeah, and it's very focused on physiologic pain.

Alice: That's exactly right. And I think that when we think about pain, very often we think first of all about physical pain—the kind that I experience if I have a headache or someone else experiences with a major disease. And what I'd like for you to do as you walk with us through this first lesson is to take a moment just to jot down on paper some of the ways in which you have experienced pain. There may be physiological pain that you experienced, but

there may also be emotional pain, because there are a great many things that cause people this agony, this hurting inside, that we call pain.

Karen: So you've had the opportunity now to jot down areas of pain that you've experienced, and now we'd like to talk about areas of pain that we've thought through, that we've worked with people around. And one of the areas is the whole issue of physiological pain, and physiological pain comes in so many shapes and sizes. There's pain that occurs very briefly or for extensive amounts of time like headaches. There's chronic pain that occurs over and over. There's pain that you can take a pill for. There's pain that you can't take medicine for that doesn't seem to let up or go away in any way, shape, or form. So, physiologically, there's just a huge, broad variety of different kinds of physiological pain that people can experience.

Alice: But we also have to talk, Karen, a bit about emotional pain, because a great many people suffer serious pain over issues that have nothing to do with their bodies but have everything to do with what's going on in their lives. I'm thinking for example of the pain that we experience around loss—losses of all sorts. Years and years ago now, your brother, our son Kent, was killed by a drunk driver, and the loss of a son in a situation like that causes enormous pain that lasts for many, many years. And there are pains of loss that we never get over. Not only would there be the loss of someone through death, but there's also the loss of a relationship through divorce or other things that come into our lives that destroy friendships or in some way cause us enormous pain.

Karen: I'm thinking also in terms of emotional pain. There's also the pain that we experience when we experience rejection. I'm thinking about a child in elementary school who is struggling to fit in, to belong to a group of kids, and finds themselves the last one picked for the dodgeball game. And that can be an enormous feeling of rejection, but then later you might also experience rejection for instance when you lose a job. So this emotional, this psychological, pain can come in so many shapes and sizes and forms.

Alice: And you know, Karen. I was thinking of another kind of loss that you've gone through very recently, and that's the loss that we experience when we move—particularly if we move from one neighborhood to another, from one city to another, out of

state, across an ocean. We're leaving everything behind that we know, and we're having to start all over again; and there is a great deal of pain as we leave behind friends, as we leave behind family, as we leave behind our church, our neighborhood, everything that was familiar. Even finding our way to the grocery store when we move to a new place can cause a lot of just anxiety, and that anxiety is a form of pain.

Karen: As a student who actually mapped out the grocery store in Dansford, Massachusetts, for that very reason in order to be able to find her way around the grocery store in this new place.

Alice: Oh, yes. You go into one supermarket and all of the produce is over on the left; you go into another one and it's somewhere down the middle. It's not easy when you move.

Karen: And you think so much about this enormous pain of, say for instance, losing your church family, you know, moving away from your friends, and you forget that there are these other smaller pains that add up.

Alice: This is true. But I was thinking of another area of pain, Karen, and that has to do with body issues. How many people experience enormous pain around body issues? I feel too fat or I feel too tall or I feel too short or I don't like the shape of my nose. I mean we go through all of these things and people literally experience anxiety and pain over them, and we spend an enormous amount of time and money trying to deal with the issues of our body that we're just dissatisfied with.

Karen: And one of the issues around the pain of not being satisfied with your body, some of that pain can sometimes result in very serious issues like eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, and so this issue of comparing your body in a dissatisfaction way with the bodies that you see in magazines or on the television can really result in a great deal of dissatisfaction that potentially could result in eating disorders.

Alice: And those eating disorders can be serious and in fact there are some that can lead to death, and there are all kinds of indicators that we need to be aware of when we are allowing our sense that we're too fat and we just simply have to slim down to the point that we are no longer eating and this can be a very dangerous situation. I read somewhere, Karen, that 60 percent of all ballerinas and fashion models have an eating disorder; and so

this is something that I do think can cause a lot of people pain. But I think beyond that is also the dollar cost to the obsession with how we look—whether we are satisfied with the way we look or whether we are part of the people who are putting literally billions of dollars into makeovers of every sort. There is a huge amount of money spent on cosmetic surgery and on cosmetics themselves and on clothing that happens to be in style at a particular time, and I think that this is a beauty obsession that causes great pain to a great many people because our culture will not allow us to be satisfied with the way we look. Madison Avenue is determined to make us dissatisfied so that we will buy the products that will promote the industry and perhaps give us that fleeting sense that we look okay.

Karen: And that creates a lot of pain for people to constantly compare oneself in negative kinds of ways with what you perceive as the ideal, and I think that these figures you were quoting—around 33 billion dollars spent on diets and many of those other kinds of expenses—I think it suggests that there's a lot of pain underneath for people around trying to figure out how to meet these ideals that really, as you've said, Mom, are in some ways just impossible to meet.

Alice: I think another body issue, too, Karen—turning to a different kind of subject—is in the area of fertility. This also is a body issue. And there are men and women who agonize over the fact that they are unable to have children, and so many things in our culture make them feel like second-class citizens or inadequate people because they don't have any children. And so I think that's a body issue as well, that someone who is walking with us through this course may have experienced personally and that has caused a great deal of pain.

Karen: I'm thinking about many times in churches on Mother's Day. There's a chance for mothers to stand up, and I think some people are experiencing the pain of not being able to have children. That pain can just really become intensified at times like those.

Alice: There's also another thing that I feel causes a great deal of pain for many people in today's world, and that is issues around our sexuality. And there are a number of different things that we could talk about in that domain. For example, the issue of: What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean in our culture today to be a woman? What is it to be masculine? What is it to be feminine? And how do I meet the cultural expectations that go

with this? What are the roles that I am expected to fulfill fill or the roles that I am to stay away from, the things that I'm shut off from? So there are a lot of issues just around who I am as male or female that I think cause a great many people pain.

Karen: There's a lot of pressure in our society to have sexual prowess, to be a tiger in bed, and we read about this in women's magazines, in men's magazines. Just, you know, we're standing at the checkout line in the grocery store and we experience all these pressures, because the truth of our lives somehow is not matching up with this ideal that we perceive.

Alice: And so we also have a huge industry in things like Viagra and other pills that will enhance our ability to perform.

Karen: We've been talking about body issues. There's also the really important body issue of pain that people experience when they experience a pregnancy that they weren't expecting or weren't wanting, and there are so many issues of pain that occur for people when all of a sudden the course in life they were taking has to change in some way.

Alice: And that reminds me too, Karen, of another area of pain, and that has to do with violence. All kinds of violence, whether it is incest for a young child, whether it is rape, whether it is domestic violence in the home, these are body issues, but they are much more than body issues. They are powerful things that impact people for life. I have a good friend who, when her mother was ill and in the hospital, her father began using her as a wife, and this so impacted her life that even now in her seventies she has not been able to work through that. And so often people say to someone like that: "Well, get over it; move on." It's not that easy.

Karen: Pain is not something that you snap your fingers and it goes away. Pain is something that we all experience. It's a human experience, and we as Christians are going to be running into people all around us who have experienced pain like this that we've been describing.

Alice: And so as you have been walking with us through this first session in our course on ministering to people in pain, perhaps you have done, as we suggested at the beginning of our session, and you've been jotting down on paper some of the areas of pain in your own life or in the lives of people that you know well. Go

course together on ministering to people in pain, we want to be clear about what we mean by pain, the breadth of it. But we want to move on then to talk about not just the pain itself, but how we can come alongside people and help them.