

No Longer Self-Conscious About the Past

I hated middle school. High school was OK and college was great, but middle school was ... well, let me put it this way. Dante never went to middle school, junior high, or whatever they called it in 14th-century Italy. Had he gone, his *Divine Comedy* would have had a Tenth Circle called Middle School.

I'm not alone in this sentiment. Middle school is a time when we're physically changing, hormones and emotions are raging, and we're trying to figure out who we are. And we're doing it while surrounded by other budding teenagers going through the same metamorphosis.

In a word, it's awkward.

Let me give you two examples that were way too common for those of us who survived middle school. The first has to do with the changing nature of friendships. Teenagers find a part of their identity in groups. However, if the group a kid wants to identify with pushes him away, it's humiliating. He's ostracized and feels like an outsider.

- There's the girl whose best friend is now socializing with a more popular group. The girls in this group laugh at her because she is not as skinny as the rest of them.
- There's the boy who is waiting for two things: (1) the growth spurt his friends have gone through, and (2) the girls to be aware that he exists. While his friends and the girls have discovered each other, he now finds himself ignored or forgotten on the weekends.

There's another form of ostracism middle-schoolers face, and it is self-imposed.

It's bad enough when an 8th-grade boy's voice cracks in the middle of a report in English, but his embarrassment is multiplied when he discovers he was standing in the front of the class the whole time with his pants unzipped. In such embarrassing moments, the boy wants to run away and never come back.

Younger adolescents tend to be very self-conscious and any misstep, no matter how minor, is multiplied in their minds.

For anyone keeping score, I survived middle school and adolescence—and I'm pretty sure you did too. I can look back on my travails in middle school and laugh about them now, but that ostracism and humiliation seemed huge at the time.

It is tragic, though, when the ostracism and/or humiliation last longer than middle school. Sadly, too many adults feel alone, even despised by others. They've been hurt once too

often, and they prefer the pain of being alone to the pain of ridicule.

Jesus met one such woman. We don't know her name, but we get the impression that those who knew her name had no respect or regard for her. The Samaritan woman Jesus met at



the well was a despised sinner (John 4). She had a reputation in town—and it wasn't a good one. So here she was alone at the well under the heat of the noonday sun. Other women had come to the well when it was cool. Had this woman gone earlier in the morning with those women, she might have been talked about, ridiculed, and openly shunned. She found the heat of the noonday sun preferable to the icy stares from others.

Yet at the end of her encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman "left her water jar, went into town, and told the people, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?'" (John 4:48-29). Catch the significance of that. She was a shunned woman, known for her sinful lifestyle. Yet now she went back to the very people who avoided her and spoke without hesitation or shame. *Shun me if you want, but I met a man you shouldn't shun. I have met the Messiah!*

What made the difference? Jesus spoke to her with respect. He knew of her past, but He still treated her with dignity. Jesus did not gloss over her lifestyle, but neither did He speak to her with disdain or condemnation. Perhaps for the first time in her life, the woman felt hope. She had made mistakes—lots of them—but she saw in Jesus a hope that moved her beyond her past.

Whatever humiliation she felt and whatever ostracism she experienced were surpassed by something greater: the hope and love of a Messiah.

- **Our past, our failures, and our sin do not define us. Jesus changes everything.**
- **We can stand with confidence because Christ is greater than our past.**
- **We can stand with confidence because Christ is greater than the opinions of others.**

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:37-39).

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