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### **Hug your porcupine!**

Porcupines are all over. Teddy bears are few. Porcupines prick. Teddies are soft. Expecting everyone around us to be soft toys whom we can hug easily with no reservations ever is unrealistic. Cain even found it difficult to hug a soft toy like Abel, and God caned him for it (Gen 4). We live in a fallen world. The challenge thrown is to be able to hug and embrace the porcupine-kind who constantly wear a guard over them. Abraham hugged selfish Lot who was a grabber and incestuous (Gen 11-19). They are difficult to understand, work with or be around. These sad ones can neither hug nor be hugged. This scenario need not remain so.

Porcupines are difficult people who don't gel easily with the world around them. They have personalities which constantly cause abrasions. They even cause bleeding. The hurt tend to keep away from them as a form of escape or adopt the, eyes-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth principle (Mt 5:38). Their thinking patterns and actions cannot be predicted. They can be judgemental, Miriam-like gossipers

meddle in other people's business like Peter, domineering, hostile, hot-tempered and impulsive like Moses and bullies like Eli's sons. Being non-committal, indecisive, cynical, critical, fearful and lazy, strongly opinionated and apathetic, they oftentimes have a strong need for approval and acceptance and are skilled in subtle manipulation.

We live in the world and are still very much a big part of it. Attempting to turn our backs to its realities is cowardice and an impossibility. Sometimes we are cornered to hug porcupines. God humorously brings difficult people into our lives to sharpen us (Prov 27:17). Instead of contemplating on schemes of running away from them, it would be wise to chalk out Biblical practicalities to handle difficult people and respond to them from a positive realm. "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your favourite outfit let him have your jeans as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles, said Jesus" (Mt 5:39-41). History has staged real life stories of how even the hardest of rocks can be eroded and shaped by just simple soft water. The soft water splashes alongside the rocky surface constantly, yet remains soft. When we are wronged, often our initial reaction is to get even. God is waiting to give us the strength to love as He does.

Ask yourself: Am I a porcupine or a teddy? Do people around me want to hug me or do they scoot at the sound of my shoes? Anybody would fear stings. Give it some deep thought if you have been losing friends lately or having difficulty keeping them. Do my colleagues trust me with personal issues which have to be treated with

strictest confidentiality? Have I ever observed a conversation to quieten if I happen to pass by? Do people want to stick around me? If any of these questions ring a bell, you probably have to work hard on shedding your sharp quills, so you can be hugged.

Porcupines can be the most familiar ones at our doorstep — could perhaps be your spouse, a colleague, a sibling or even a parent. Learning to hug them is an art by itself which calls for an enormous amount of hard work. “If your enemy is hungry, take him out for dinner; if he is thirsty, get him a lemon soda. In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head and the Lord will reward you” (Prov 25:21,22). A porcupine who has tasted the warmth and genuineness of your hugs will soon want to pass on the hug to others. Try it. It’s worth it. God’s way of retaliation is most effective, yet difficult to do. There’s nothing like leaning on the Balancer of all accounts!

Loving the lovable and cuddly ones does not demand draining efforts. It’s norm. Jesus asked, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:46-48). Embracing the porcupine fore-knowing the pokes you are going to be ‘gifted’ with is risky. Push yourself to walk that extra mile and enjoy the shower of God’s honour.

While a rusted cliché — “You change, then I’ll change,” is carved crudely on our minds. Swimming against the tide is what we are called for. Gather courage and tell yourself, “I’ll go first.” Forgive them. Give them ample time

to cool. True, porcupines are porcupines! They are made like that but they are not meant to stay like that. They are given a choice to cling on to the Cross where the transformation of the fabric of their rough-edged personalities can smoothen. Extend them grace and time to come to the Cross. Losing no time, work on your moves. When porcupines are secure and know for sure that you are not one on their list of enemies, they will surely let you close to them. Shedding of quills may not be instant but there is a whole bunch of chances for them to let you hug them. Give them that non-threatening atmosphere. Keep them at ease. Let them be assured that you mean no harm. Just be with them. Listen to them. Hold your tongue from self-righteous-sounding advices. Be their friend. Stay with their good and bad times. Don't point fingers. Pray with and for them. Try gifting them a word of encouragement or appreciation. Moses let Hobab know that he was important and needed by complimenting on his desert skills (Num 10:29-32). Let them know they are valued. Remember never to be judgemental. They probably were not born porcupines. The storms of life have made them into one—bitter and defensive for survival! Could be a battered childhood, an unmet need, a loss of a parent which could be a major life-event, an unmendable catastrophe in the developmental years... we never can decipher if it was love or loathe that shaped their beings. Walk into their shoes. Empathy helps anyone to wriggle out of their hardened shells. Hurt people hurt. Those who have not received love and respect cannot give the same. It's because they don't have it in them. If you are a sensitive Christian who has a heart for winning souls, your eyes should have welled up by now. Aren't porcupines sad beings who deserve your attention? Love them.

As a helper and a well-meaning person, as you approach difficult people, expect hurt. Choose not to respond impulsively. In the worst situation ask yourself two questions — If I do not respond what is the worst thing that can result from it? If I do respond what is the worst thing that can result from it? Being confident and secure in Christ is your best defense. The world would not end. Go on. Keep trying. Perceive the happenings objectively. Let the ball roll. Abraham rushed to rescue Lot when he was in trouble with the four kings in Genesis 14, ignoring his “I-always-want-the-best” attitude.

Balance the ‘dove’ and the ‘serpent’ in you. Don’t tell your secrets to a gossip. Get your needs maturely met by someone who can meet it. This is part of accepting difficult people for who they are. Know when to distance yourself in the case of continuous abuse. Remember you don’t have to be close to everyone. Just be polite. Cultivate more positive relationships.

Make every effort to “live in peace with all men and to be holy” (Heb 12:14). God places relationships and holiness on the same balance. Are you nursing grudges? Don’t! You are only hurting yourself. Holding a grudge against someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die! Ask the Holy Spirit to heal the hurt that causes bitterness.

A scary statement in 1 Pet 3:7, “Husbands be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” Did you know that a wife who is expected to work fulltime outside and inside the home with no sensitivity and consideration from her husband will soon turn into a porcupine?

A forgiving spirit shows that a person has received God's forgiveness. Fighting back satisfies our heads but gives a bad feeling to our soul. It's an unnecessary and unproductive battle. If we are critical, we will receive criticism. The way we treat others will come back to us in full measure, (Lk 6:37,38). Treat others as you would want them to treat you.

Even in the Christian ministerial context we can have difficult people with whom we can have strong relational issues. Missionaries and Pastors don't turn angels as they serve the community — they remain human — in flesh and blood. They might be equally committed like us in the things of the Kingdom. Believers and carriers of the gospel can be porcupines, too. Paul, in Philippians 4:2,3, speaks on reconciliation, tolerance and power plays. Resolve conflicts. Make peace. Unresolved conflicts cancerously spread. Negativity in one area of our lives bleeds into the other areas as well.

We don't have the right to look down on porcupines. We might be one ourselves! "Why do you look at the speck of saw dust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" This is Christ's teaching on judging others (Mt 7:3). The traits that bother us in others are often the habits we dislike in ourselves. Our untamed habits and behaviour patterns are the very ones that we most want to change in others. It's easier to magnify others' faults.

Just because porcupines are given a long rope of mercy and grace they should not enjoy the comfort in their rocking chairs. A drastic effort towards change is a must. A willingness to change is an important step. An

acceptance that change is a dire need becomes the crucial ice-breaker. Many of us may not realize the porcupine-traits in us. The simplest but most difficult step is to ask a friend who watches you closely. Prepare yourself to receive a shocking and unedited feedback. Take the criticism well and work on one sharp quill at a time — be it sharp words, snubs, a mocking nature, or a foxy mind. While shedding quills may not be feasible in the background of nature, it's definitely possible to blunt the sharp ends. Give yourself a pat when you have made even a move of an inch towards positive change. Don't give up! You can! Stretch out your hand for help when you seem to suffocate.

There were times when women were earmarked for relationship issues, but the virus has crept into the other gender as well in a more severe form. Onesimus, we read, was an unwanted runaway porcupine. But he worked hard on himself and, under the tender leadership of Paul, made a great team-contributor of himself. Is there is a difficult person in your life whom you say you have forgiven, but who still needs your kindness? Paul's fashionable yet Biblical tactfulness on handling Onesimus and Philemon needs a roaring applause. Paul identified with these two porcupines calling them, "brother" and "son," requested, not demanded, Philemon to do the right thing though it was beyond the natural flow of mind. He pleaded for Christian love and did not display power or authority, and took personal responsibility saying, "Charge it on me!" (Phile 1). Wonder, if we can walk on his steps!

Naomi was Ruth's mother-in-law and not monster-in-law! Ruth said it even better: "All of yours are mine and I am at no cost leaving you" (Ruth 1:16,17). Neither were

Ruth nor Naomi porcupines to each other. They were rather angels to one another. They guarded, protected, loved each other and met each others' needs. A strong mutual commitment kept their bond a bond.

Jonathan is a shining example of loyalty. His love was selfless towards porcupine, Saul. It was his striking relationship with God that helped him deal with his complicated situations in life. His loyalty to God was the secret of his loyalty to the disloyal. That tainted the choices he made towards difficult people. Those close to you should be able to see who has your greatest loyalty. David grieved for Jonathan and said, "Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women" (2 Sam 1:26).

Can you love your pricking neighbour as yourself (Matt 22:39)? Porcupines are precious to God. God hugs the porcupines and the teddies. "He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45). Didn't God hug the dirty porcupine, Rahab, and choose her to be David's and Jesus' ancestor? He added a feather to her cap by listing her in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11!

Porcupines deserve a hug. Hug your porcupine today!