

What About Sin?

From time to time, I am asked the question, “When teaching about spiritual growth, why don't you talk more about sin? After all, the real problem people have is sin, and they need to confess, repent, and ask for forgiveness in order to be free of sin.”

Now obviously behind this question there is a goal in mind, which is that Christians should be enabled to live lives of purity and continue to become more and more free of sin as they grow in their walk with God. With that goal, I can entirely agree. We need to pursue holiness, and encourage and train others how to pursue it as well. But also behind that question there are a few other assumptions that I find to be truly problematic.

More to the point, however, is that when we teach spiritual formation, we actually are addressing the sin problem constantly, because we are training people how to deal with the causes of sin and showing them the means of overcoming sin. This can be quite a new process for Christians who have been taught to focus on the sin they have already committed as a way of inducing change. They have been told they need to feel enough remorse to confess their sin and ask for forgiveness, and to promise to try hard to change. Unfortunately, this is like waiting for the dandelions to go to seed, and then cutting off the tops and trying our best to get to them next time before they go to seed. Christian spiritual formation, on the other hand, digs out the roots and kills the weeds so we no longer have to deal with them over and over. This, by necessity, requires us to use a different vocabulary and different means. For those who have been trained to focus on dandelion seeds, that can sound like we are neglecting something very important.

And yes, it is important to go to God whenever we become aware of sin in our life, and to ask Him for help in our restoration. We are not advocating that we ignore such things. But once we learn how to engage with God for healing, growth, and inner transformation, we can proactively defeat the power of sin before it bears fruit. Why focus on how to deal with seeds when we can kill the roots?

Now before proceeding much farther, it is necessary to correct a very common misunderstanding in regard to “repentance” itself. Most teaching on repentance assumes that our part is to confess, ask for forgiveness, and change our behavior or attitude to be more in line with what is good. The problem here, is the assumption that we are capable of making the necessary change simply by choosing to do so. Granted, there are many aspects of life that we can decide to do differently. Non-Christians can choose to do many things differently as well. If they truly believe it is their best interest, most people can restrain themselves from lying, cheating, or killing without supernatural intervention.

But what we cannot do is change our soul by direct effort, any more than we can talk ourselves out of a phobia. We might be able to repress some of the symptoms of the problem, but we cannot simply choose to not have it anymore. Many people who struggle to give up an addiction, for example, end up replacing it with another. They give up alcohol and take up smoking; they give up smoking and start over-eating. What they are unable to do is stop the underlying cravings that are driving the addictions. In many cases, they may not even be aware of those cravings or know what they are caused by. The same is true for many problems we deal with, such as feeling hatred toward a person who harmed us, desiring revenge, feeling anxious about our life, being unable to forgive someone for the tenth time, harboring unresolved regrets – the list could go on. Many

of the spiritual issues that we struggle with are driven by areas of our mind and soul that do not change by an act of the will.

Creating the conditions necessary for the changes we need in our soul is what spiritual formation is all about, including how to change the internal parts of our mind and heart that we do not have direct access to. Once we learn how to care for our soul in this way, we have the means to move forward. And often this process requires engaging with God very directly so He can change our heart and mind.

Repentance then, is best envisioned as “engaging with God for a change of heart that is far deeper than we could accomplish on our own.” We actually see this in Psalm 51, one of the most famous psalms of repentance in all the Bible. Nowhere in the psalm does David ever promise to not commit adultery again or not set up anyone to be killed so he can have their wife. Instead, he engages with God and asks Him to “create in me a clean heart.”

The reason this is so important is that sin is not a self-initiating cause. Sin is caused by something else. If our only approach to dealing with sin is to repent every time we sin, there are a lot of sins that we will never be free of, because we are failing to deal with what is causing the sin. For a more comprehensive explanation of this whole issue of what causes us to fail and how we can deal decisively with sin (as well as our wounding) I would recommend the book, *The Truth About Lies and Lies About Truth*.

Relationship With God

One of the biggest areas of confusion regarding sin is how it impacts our relationship with God. Many Christians have been taught that sin blocks our relationship with God and that we have to deal with the sin in order to restore the relationship. While there is a grain of truth in this, the main impact of this teaching is to distort sin's power, our part of the process in holy living, and God's response in restoration.

Now this may be a bit jarring, but it needs to be said. Generally speaking, sin is actually **not** a barrier to engaging with God! If it was, we wouldn't be able to engage with Him in order to repent. Jesus sat and ate with sinners all the time. He did not insist that they all repent and "get right" before He would have anything to do with them. "Blessed are the spiritually impoverished, because they get to be in the Kingdom, too!" (Mt.5). Jesus mentored His disciples for three years, and at the end they were still deeply flawed. That did not get in the way of their relationship. There is absolutely no evidence in the New Testament that our relationship with God is conditionally based on how clean we are.

If God were to refuse to engage with us whenever we had some unconfessed sin, we would never be able to have a relationship with Him – because we are always missing the mark somewhere. The assumption that we can get righteous enough for God to connect with us is simply not biblical. The truth is, God wants us to come to Him with our sin, and ask for His help in dealing with it so that we can actually be free of it, not just make some resolution about it. That requires us to work with Him, as our Mentor and Healer, to dig out the roots of our malfunction and receive His love and truth experientially into those dark places.

There are actually only a few types of sin that can rupture our relationship with God or create a barrier to engaging with Him. And whenever the Bible talks about sin causing distance between God's people and God, the sin that is being addressed virtually always falls into one of these categories:

1. Wholesale idolatry – which makes sense, since in this sin the person is no longer even trying to connect with the true God. Idolatry disconnects us from God by definition.
2. Refusing to hear – which again, makes sense. If the person has no desire for God to speak into their life, they have thrown up a major barrier.
3. Refusing to be impacted by what is heard (or by truth). If a person has already decided not to respond to what God is revealing, they are effectively telling Him they are not interested in a transformative relationship.
4. Intentional self-indulgence. When a person is the center of their universe and relegates God to the fringes of their life, there is very little that God could say to them that they would be willing to hear.

A common misconception that many people believe, is that when we sin in some manner, God turns His back toward us and stops wanting to have anything to do with us until we figure out what we did wrong, confess it, "repent" of it and ask for His forgiveness. Only then will God turn to face us and resume the relationship. This is a very distorted view of both God and sin, greatly overestimates our ability to "get right with God." Above all, it assumes that sin is something I need to deal with first, before God will talk to me, and it limits God's involvement to that of forgiving – as if we could accomplish the necessary change of heart in our own power. This is also very dangerously close to trying to earn God's attention.

My own experience is that the opposite is true. I may be engaging with God about some passage in Scripture, and as He begins to show me how it connects with my own life, it dawns on me that I have stuff that needs to be brought to God for his cleansing and renewal. The engaging comes first, and reveals the sin, which God then offers to help me with. Or I may be dealing with some old wound that was left by earlier life experience, and in the middle of God healing it, I discover some resentment I still hold in my heart as a result of the hurtful way I was treated. Again, my buried "sin" did not prevent me from engaging with God. Rather, by engaging with Him, the sin was revealed and dealt with.

Sin is not something that we put away. It is something about which we work with God to put away. "If by means of the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the flesh" (Rom.8). That requires engaging with God first, before the sin is dealt with, so that God can deal with the sin in ways that far surpass what we could "repent" of.

For those who really want to engage with God and are having difficulty doing so, it is important for them to understand that their brokenness is not what is getting in the way. Telling them "if you get right with God then He will connect with you" would be like asking a sick person to get well before they go see the doctor, because the doctor does not like to look at disease. No, the truth is that God wants to be deeply involved in our process of becoming whole.

The problems that most often get in the way of our relationship with God are: distorted images of God; being afraid of God or angry with God for what He did or did not do; hiding from God because of the shame we feel; or feeling hopeless about connecting with Him or receiving anything from Him we need. Paying attention to these emotional barriers is important because they are often overlooked or viewed as something we need to "overcome" by willpower.

Worse yet, anger, shame, fear, and hopelessness are sometimes viewed as sin or caused by sin – something that should be “repented” of and repressed. In truth, these emotions are most often caused by wounding or by our lack of spiritual eyesight, not by sin we have committed. When we categorically denounce these as symptoms of sin, we usually end up blaming the victim, and condemning people for having been hurt by those around them. If instead, we see these emotions as symptoms of a broken soul, we have the freedom to approach God with open heart and hands, asking Him to reveal the causes of these issues and what He wants to do with them. If He shows us that the emotion is caused by sin, then so be it. Either way, He will also show us what we need in order to renew our mind and heart.

God wants to rid us of sin, far more than any oncologist would want to rid a patient of cancer. But we must never limit His involvement to that of addressing the aftermath of sin, hearing our confession and offering forgiveness. God wants to remove in us the causes of sin and the power of sin! That way we can escape the continuous cycle of repent – restore – fall again – repent, and so on. But He does not expect us to heal ourselves. We need to learn how to work with Him so that He can do in us what we cannot do for ourselves, which is to write His laws on our heart and to change us from the inside out.

The reasons why Christian formation focuses on practices and ways of engaging with God that change our heart and mind, is that this is by far the most effective way of purging our lives of sin and filling our lives with God's love and grace.