

YOU CAN FIND FREEDOM FROM SIN

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Romans 7:15 I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and my bad conscience shows that I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But I can't help myself, because it is sin inside me that makes me do these evil things.

¹⁸ I know that I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. ¹⁹ When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway.

²¹ It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. ²² I love God's law with all my heart. ²³ But there is another law at work within me that is at war with my mind. This law wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. ²⁴ Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin?

²⁵ Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Will I ever be free from this sin?!

It's a common lament! We are all familiar with it. The great Apostle Paul described that anguished struggle with words we can all relate to—words that in various forms have been repeated too many times to count.

“Thank God! Jesus Christ is the answer,” he wrote. But how, we may ask? How does Jesus free me from my all-too-familiar sin?

The answer, found in the pages of the Bible, begins like this: First, Jesus takes away the *sting* of sin.

Dying in our place—the Just for the unjust—Jesus removes the righteous anger of God. He forgives our ignorance, our rebellion, our self-will, and reconnects us with God as Father. He puts His Spirit within us, as our constant Guide and Strengthener. And He offers us His written Word, so that we might become better acquainted with God and His great love.

This great work of redemption requires only one thing to be complete: our cooperation. We must *trust* His plan and we must *follow* His plan for change.

Receiving Jesus as the Christ, the Savior, is the first step. Without a new birth, it is impossible to participate in the Kingdom of Heaven. Have you been born again?

The new birth is an act of God in response to laying down your distrust, your unbelief, and putting your hope in the saving grace and power of Jesus Christ. You can do that today! You can begin right now by inviting God to act in your life through Jesus Christ.

But the new birth is only the beginning of your salvation, as all of us here who have been born again could attest. The follow through is a growing cooperative relationship between you and Jesus—a shared honesty and devotion. It is the lifelong process of being freed from sin.

If you truly want to be freed from your sin, you will do three things over and over again, and through them Christ will deliver you, inch by inch, from the death grip of sin's deceptive and destructive power:

1. Repent
2. Confess
3. Change

Repentance

Repentance is more than a feeling, more than tears of sorrow, more than contrition or regret.

It is Paul who warns us of the distinction between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow:

2 Corinthians 7:8 Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—⁹ yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so you were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰ Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

Worldly sorrow generally means regret that you were *caught* or that you must suffer the *consequences* of your deed. On the other hand, godly sorrow recognizes that you have done something that is *morally wrong* and have offended God, whether or not you were caught by someone else.

This awareness, or awakening, is what we call “coming to our senses,” and is expressed in the story of two sons, as told by Jesus:

Luke 15:11 Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³ A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. ¹⁶ The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding to the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man.”’”

In his deepest distress, at his lowest point, this young man experienced an awakening, a realization of his own self-deception. He had thought he was someone who was going somewhere on his own, until that moment. He was engaged in a struggle for survival against the odds of his circumstances, until that moment. In that moment, a light turned on. In that moment, he remembered who he was when he began, and recognized how far he had fallen. In that brilliant moment, the scales fell from his eyes and he saw all things clearly. In that moment, he knew what he needed to do to find freedom.

Repentance is a process of transformation that engages *thought* and *word* and *deed*, as outlined by Isaiah:

Isaiah 55:7 Let the people turn from their wicked deeds. Let them banish from their minds the very thought of doing wrong! Let them turn to the Lord that he may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

⁸ *"My thoughts are completely different than yours," says the Lord. "And My ways are far beyond anything you could imagine."*

Confession

A key expression of genuine repentance is confession. Sadly, it is a key that is too seldom used correctly. The Bible suggests it is a practice that provides mutual help to those who participate in it.

James 5:16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

The Roman church diminished this act of love by relegating it to the clergy alone, instead of trusted peers. The fellowship of believers is enriched and strengthened by this shared openness.

Even without that misappropriation, we ourselves are inclined to trivialize the act of confession by turning it into something mechanical, contrived, and insincere. I do not mean that it must be spontaneous to be real; it can still be genuine when it is well-planned.

We have all heard what we may call "token" statements of confession that are merely designed to get someone to stop bothering you or to transfer responsibility to someone else.

Notice how the following so-called confessions are diluted by the words in italics:

"Perhaps I was wrong."

"Maybe I could have tried harder."

"Possibly I should have waited to hear your side of the story."

"I guess I was wrong when I said those critical things about you; *I only did it because you made me so angry.*"

"I shouldn't have lost my temper, but I was so tired."

Consider how each of these statements would have genuine value if the italicized words were left out.

Genuine confession involves what Ken Sande refers to as the "Seven A's." Not all seven are required every time; minor offenses can be handled with a simple statement. But to be thorough, consider these seven elements:

1. Address everyone involved.
2. Avoid if, but, and maybe.
3. Admit specifically.
4. Apologize.
5. Accept the consequences.
6. Alter your behavior.
7. Ask for forgiveness.

Last week, Rev. Ted Haggard, pastor of the 14,000 member New Life Church in Colorado Springs, and president of the National Association of Evangelicals, gradually admitted to purchasing methamphetamines and the services of a male prostitute. It was yet another shock to the church world and a devastating blow to the members of the church he had founded.

After several days of unclear and conflicting reports, a letter of confession written by Rev. Haggard was read to the congregation. While my mind reels as I try to understand how a brother of such prominence would allow such flagrant sin to master his life in secret, I admire his forthrightness in confession. I think you will agree that he has included all seven elements of thorough confession in his written statement. He has genuinely confessed his sins. But that is about the past; the future is not so clear.

Confession is not the end of the journey to freedom, only an oasis along the way to prepare us for the longer and more arduous journey that follows.

Practice Change

The third key to freedom from sin is to cooperate with God for change in your future behavior. Repentance, like salvation, is not complete without verbal confession *and* practical change in behavior.

We have all *wanted* to change, as Paul expressed in his letter to the church in Rome. But achieving it is another matter—a matter of time and repeated effort.

Let me offer you four steps to a transformed life.

1. Prayer to God

Prayer is the starting point of change. Change does not come from within you, but from above. After all, the changes we are seeking are called the “fruit” or “product” of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). They require daily dependence upon God. Prayer is the method of sincerely seeking God’s assistance throughout the process of change.

2. Focus on Jesus

You must consciously and deliberately change the focus of your affections and your thoughts, being “*renewed in the spirit of your minds*” (Ephesians 4:23). We have been carefully instructed on how to do that:

Colossians 3:1 Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits at God’s right hand in the place of honor and power. ² let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth. ³ For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.

The more time, thought, and energy you invest in the Lord, the more He will reign over your heart and mind.

3. Study His Word

Wisdom, knowledge, and understanding are not mysteriously infused in our minds; they are the result of careful and repeated study of His Word. This is how our minds are “made new.”

Romans 12:2 Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect His will really is.

4. Practice, Practice, Practice

In one way or another, every situation in which you find yourself is an opportunity to practice something worthwhile. Practice may be planned or spontaneous.

Do you know the story of Glenn Cunningham? Glenn's legs were severely burned when he was a young boy. Although he was told that he would never walk again, he developed a rigorous training program of stretching, walking, and running exercises that he followed faithfully in spite of constant and severe pain. In addition, as his legs healed, he began to look for other opportunities to run. If a letter needed to be mailed, Glenn ran it to the Post Office. If his mother needed flour, Glenn ran to the grocery store to buy it. If his dad needed nails, Glenn ran to the hardware store to get some. Tasks that other boys grumbled about Glenn saw as opportunities to rebuild his body. His hard work paid off. In 1934, Glenn set a new world record for running the mile! Through a combination of planned training and spontaneous exercise, Glenn overcame seemingly impossible handicaps and achieved the goal he had set his heart upon.

This story condenses many long months of painful struggle, mind-twisting fears, and dark discouragement into a single paragraph. Recovery from spiritual tragedy is no less demanding or extended, but with persistent faith can be equally triumphant.

No matter how many failures you experience (like saying hurtful things or allowing bitterness to overwhelm you for a time), remember that you can change. Ask God for His help once more, and try again.

Paul reflected with pride in his friends:

2 Corinthians 7:11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to change, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to do what is right.

Let godly sorrow do its work in your life and you, too, can find freedom from the sin "that so easily besets you."