

Chapter Five: Addressing Sin

Once the problem has been accurately diagnosed it is the counselor's responsibility to restore the person.

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught by a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.¹

The word translated “restore” is *katarizo*, which means *to repair or make fit*. It was used in the Gospels of *mending* the fishing nets. In Luke 6:40 it refers to the process of training a disciple. It means to take someone from where he is to where he ought to be – repairing what is wrong, and making him a point of spiritual fitness.

This command is revolutionary. Most people do not respond this way to sin in others. If our car breaks down we spend time and money to get it repaired and back to proper working order. But when a brother or sister in Christ breaks down, how often is our response gossip, distain, judgmentalism, ignoring the problem, or sweeping the person out to the fringes of our lives, rather than spending the time and energy and resources necessary to restore the person? How often we are quicker to junk a servant of the living God than a broken down car.

God commands restoration. And the first step in restoring a person who has been overtaken by a sin is to bring the person to repentance. If he is already repentant this step can be skipped, but if the person is continuing in unrepentant sin, Scripture gives clear instructions on how to stimulate a repentant heart.

“*Show him his fault*”

Matthew 18:15 If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault,² just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

The counselee may be unaware of guilt because of ignorance of God's commands, self-deception, or lack of self-examination. Bringing such a person to realize his guilt involves two parts: exposing the wrongness of the action and persuading the person of guilt.

Expose the wrongness of an action:

Ephesians 5:11,13 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. ... everything exposed by the light becomes visible....

1 Timothy 5:20 Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

Persuade the person of his guilt:

1 Corinthians 14:24 But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all....

2 Timothy 4:2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage— with great patience and careful instruction.

Titus 1:9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

Be Careful!

This is not a time for clumsiness or thoughtlessness. It is misguided to think that just because the person is in sin, it is OK to be rude, insensitive, or unnecessarily harsh. In many ways this is the most strategic moments in counseling. When you first present the person's fault to him he can go one of two ways – humble repentance or defensiveness and

¹ Author's translation.

² The Greek word here is *elegko*, and it is the same Greek word behind each of the underlined phrases in the texts below.

denial. If something in your manner pushes him toward the latter, you have just made his condition much worse. Once he has denied the sin or begun making excuses for it, his heart has begun moving in the wrong direction. And for him to be restored that movement must be arrested and then reversed. Pushing a person toward a bad response by having a poorly thought out approach is the height of cruelty. Use the golden rule. When someone sees a sin in your life, wouldn't you want that person to present it to you in a way that would make you open to receive correction, rather than in a way that would be likely to push you toward a response that would make your sin permanent?

Rebuke

Once the sin is exposed, most Christians will respond with sorrow and repentance. If the person refuses to repent, however, it is time for rebuke.

Luke 17:3 “So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him.”

The Greek word here (epitimaō) means to rebuke, censure, warn, or punish. This term is aimed more at the will than the mind. It goes beyond persuading the person he has done wrong. Rebuke has the goal of persuading someone to change. A rebuke is not a suggestion; it is a command that calls for action (Mt.8:26).

Admonish

The Greek word for *admonish* is *noutheteō*³. It means *to instruct or warn in an effort to correct behavior.*

1 Thessalonians 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, warn (noutheteo) those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

2 Thessalonians 3:14,15 If anyone does not obey our instruction ... warn (noutheteo) him as a brother.

Like every other step in the process, admonition must be done with God's Word. We must not use our own human wisdom to admonish one another.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom....

Admonition gets its power from God's Word. Just pointing a finger and complaining about the person's behavior will not have divine power to bring about heart change. But showing a person his behavior and comparing it with what the Bible says infuses divine power and grace into the situation.

Admonition, not Shaming

Admonishing is not the same as shaming—but it is similar enough that they can be confused. When Paul admonished the Corinthians he had to clarify that what he was doing in admonition and not shaming.

1 Corinthians 4:14 I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn (noutheteo) you, as my dear children.

The word translated *shame* means to cause someone to look down on himself. We are not to shame people (beat up on them and try to make them feel bad). The goal is to bring the person to the point of contrition – not despair. If there is not a skillful, loving approach the person may become discouraged and give up. Admonition tends to generate Godly sorrow driving the person to repentance; shaming tends toward worldly sorrow resulting in self-destruction. (2 Cor.7:10)

Admonition, however, can look quite similar to shaming. Consider Paul's admonition:

1 Corinthians 4:7-8,10,13 For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And ... why do you boast...? Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! ... We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! ... Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

³ This word is behind the phrase “nouthetic counseling.” A nouthetic counselor is one who believes that people need biblical admonition, not psychological theories.

What sarcasm! No wonder he had to clarify that he was admonishing and not shaming. Sometimes admonition has to be harsh in order to be effective. But even if that kind of harshness is necessary it should break your heart, just as it did Paul's. Like a father welling up with compassion for the child he is disciplining, Paul finds himself unable to continue with the harshness any longer:

1 Corinthians 4:14,17a I am not writing this to shame you, but to admonish you, as my dear children.... I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus....

This is the heart of love. He would prefer to embrace them, but he knows there are times when strong words are needed:

1 Corinthians 4:18a Some of you have become arrogant....

People can become so desensitized to the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit that gentle words simply do not get their attention. They need someone to love them enough to grab them by the lapel and shake them. The counselor must have the courage and strength to do that, and the wisdom and love to know the difference between admonishing and shaming.

Warning

When the sinning brother does not respond to admonition the temptation will be to give up. But there is still a powerful tool that must not be neglected – warning. Scripture calls us to alert the person about the consequences that will come if he does not repent. This can be tremendously helpful to the person in sin. Sin causes a loss of perspective and an inability to consider long-term consequences, and a loving, firm warning can bring him back to reality.

Some examples of Biblical warnings

Persistence in Sin

Deuteronomy 29:19-20 When such a person ... thinks, "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way." This will bring disaster ...**20** The Lord will never be willing to forgive him; his wrath and zeal will burn against that man. All the curses written in this book will fall upon him.

Hebrews 10:26-27 **26** If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, **27** but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Making Excuses

Proverbs 28:13 He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

Proverbs 10:9 The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.

Dabbling

Proverbs 5:22 The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast.

Ecclesiastes 7:26 I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.

Forfeited Grace, estrangement from God

Jonah 2:8 Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

Proverbs 28:9 If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable.

Psalms 30:6 When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken." **7** O Lord, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.

Proverbs 15:8 The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.

Isaiah 57:12 I will expose your righteousness and your works, and they will not benefit you. **13** When you cry out for help, let your collection [of idols] save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away. But the man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain."

Ephesians 5:3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. **4** Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. **5** For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person--such a man is an idolater--has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. **6** Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. **7** Therefore do not be partners with them.

Exposure and Punishment

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Proverbs 15:10 Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path; he who hates correction will die.

Hebrews 13:4 Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

Destruction and Death

Hosea 9:10 ... they became as vile as the thing they loved.

Romans 6:21 What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! **22** But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.

Job 31:1 I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl. **2** For what is man's lot from God above, his heritage from the Almighty on high? **3** Is it not ruin for the wicked, disaster for those who do wrong? **4** Does he not see my ways and count my every step?

Proverbs 25:28 Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.

Proverbs 7:21 With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk. **22** All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose **23** till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.

When is the last time you warned someone of the consequences of sin? Warning is a neglected responsibility in our day, as it is unpleasant and requires careful thought and study. But it may very well be the key to rescuing a brother from destruction.

Provoke

Like the English word *provoke*, the Greek word *paroxusmos* is normally used negatively, such as in being provoked to anger (1 Cor.13:5, Acts 17:16). The writer of Hebrews, however, commands that we provoke others not to anger but to love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:24 And let us consider how we may spur (lit., provoke) one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

In addition to exposing the person's fault to him, rebuking him, admonishing him, and warning him, seek to *provoke* him—not to anger, but to love and good deeds. Inflammate the person—not to wrath, but to the Christian way of life. Give some extended thought to how to "push his buttons" – not buttons that activate sin but buttons that stimulate righteousness. Learn what kinds of things motivate this particular person and make your appeal from that perspective.

Strive to make the godly response seem attractive to him.

Repentance

The goal of exposing, admonishing, rebuking, warning, and provoking is repentance. Once the person has repented all reproof and rebuke should cease and give way to forgiveness, encouragement, comfort.

Life or Death

When Scripture summarizes the entire message of Jesus, one word emerges: “Repent.”⁴ The same goes for the ministry of John the Baptist and the apostles.⁵ Where there is no repentance, there is no hope of forgiveness of sins, knowing God, or going to heaven.⁶ It is possible for a true Christian to go for a time refusing to repent, but generally speaking, the unrepentant heart is the heart of an unbeliever.

Definition

Repentance is not simply sorrow or regret over sin. One can feel suicidal with guilt and regret and still not be repentant. Nor is repentance simply admitting to being imperfect and resolving to do better. Everyone does that.

In the Old Testament there are two components of repentance: sorrow and turning.⁷ When a person finally admits the direction of his life is moving away from God and becomes contrite and broken, and then reverses the direction of his life toward God, that is repentance.

Repentance involves the whole person, including the inner man.

Isaiah 55:7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him.

There is a reversal in both one’s *thoughts* and his *way* (his direction or path). It is a redirection of the will. It is not a mere resolution but a whole new path of life.

The prodigal son’s repentance

In Luke 15 Jesus describes the exuberant joy God experiences when a sinner repents. This chapter is particularly helpful for understanding what repentance is because Jesus actually describes the thought process of the prodigal as he repents.

He had taken his father’s money, left home, and blown it all on wild living. Beginning in verse 17 Jesus describes the young man’s repentance in several steps:

1. Waking up to reality

“When he came to his senses ...” (v. 17a)

To come to one’s senses¹ means to wake up to what is really going on. When we are in sin we are in denial - detached from reality in a fantasy world thinking *I can keep going down this path and still be okay*, or *I’ll be able to recover easily enough*, or *What I’m doing is not really sin*. The first step in repentance is to wake up to reality and acknowledge *I am walking away from God, and unless something drastic happens, I will only get further from Him*.

When a person comes to his senses it produces a powerful sense of urgency in repentance. A lackadaisical repentance (“Yeah, I guess what I did was wrong – sort of”), or a grudging repentance (“Alright already! I admit it – I was wrong. There – are you happy now?”) are signs that the person really has not come to grips with reality yet. True repentance has a powerful earnestness. Another important passage in Scripture on the subject of repentance is 2 Corinthians 7:11, where the repentance of the Corinthian church is described. Notice how much Paul focuses on their passion and earnestness as markers of the genuineness of their repentance:

⁴ **Matthew 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”**

Luke 5:32 “I have come to call ... sinners to repentance.”

⁵ Mt.3:12, Acts 2:14-41, Mark 6:12, Luke 24:46-47, Acts 17:30-31.

⁶ Acts 2:38, 3:19, Luke 13:5, 2 Peter 3:9

⁷ The Greek word for “repentance” (*metanoeo*) translates both the Hebrew *SHOOV* (to turn or return) and *NAHAM* (to be sorrowful, to regret).

2 Corinthians 7:11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

While I was studying this subject of godly sorrow, I received a call from a woman in our church who rebuked me for lacking Christ-like compassion for people who suffer. At first I was a little defensive, but after listening for several minutes, I realized this was a valid rebuke.

When the conversation ended, I went right back to work. I didn't want to let anything interrupt my study. After all, I don't have time to sit around and think about that sin in my life—I'm too busy preparing to teach the church how to be serious about repentance!

I had to study almost all of 2 Corinthians 7:11 before it finally sank in that I was ignoring the very truth I was attempting to learn. So I backed away from my desk and spent some time in prayer—confessing that I did not have the same attitude toward that sin that God had, and crying out to Him to conform my thinking to His, and to grant repentance. Then I spent some time thinking about how I could be energetic and zealous and hasty about making changes in that area. When I thought of some things, I did them.

How easy it is for us to take our sin lightly! God is so patient and so gracious and forgiving that we can easily be deceived in thinking our sin is not really all that serious. But true repentance comes only when godly sorrow produces earnestness.

2. Realizing consequences

“... he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’” (v. 17b)
A key aspect of repentance is coming to grips with the destructiveness of the sin.

3. Returning to the Father

“I will set out and go back to my father” (v. 18a)

This is the crux of the issue with repentance. He does not say, “Look at my budget; I’ve got to cut back on being so wild and promiscuous.” The heart of the issue was not his spending or activities. *The real issue was that he had walked away from his father, and the solution was to go back to his father.* If one’s repentance is nothing but reforming behavior it is not true repentance. Repentance is turning *from sin to God.*

In 2 Corinthians 7:10 Paul differentiates between worldly sorrow (which leads to death) and godly sorrow (which leads to repentance). Feeling bad about sin is not repentance. It is not even half the battle. It is none of the battle. Satan can use that sorrow over sin to destroy the person just as easily as he can use the sin itself. Sorrow over sin is only good when it drives a person back to the Father.

Part of returning to the Father is returning to His people. There is no fellowship with God without fellowship with the people of God.

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

One of the proofs of the genuine repentance of the Corinthians was their longing to be restored to fellowship not only with God but also with Paul (2 Cor.7:7). Unrepentant sinners generally do not desire the company of righteous people. The excuse may be that the Church is filled with hypocrites, or that they have been mistreated by Christians in the past, but the reality is that those who love the light love fellowship (1 Jn.1:7) and those who do not generally have something to hide.

John 3:20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

True repentance brings a deep longing for nearness to godly people. When David repented of his sin with Bathsheba he said, “Men of a perverse heart will be far from me.... My eyes will be on the faithful in the land that they may dwell with me” (Ps.101:4,6).

4. Confession

“... and say to him: ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.’” (v. 18b)

Repentance requires admitting sinfulness—against both God and people. It is not enough simply to confess to God. Confession must also be made to those who were hurt by the sin. (Wisdom must be used here. If confessing the sin will

do more harm than good, it may be wisest not to bring it up. For example, if a person has harbored angry, spiteful thoughts toward a brother, but that brother has no idea, it would be hurtful to confess that sin to him. A better approach may be to simply say, “I have not loved you as I should.”)

5. Humility

“I am no longer worthy to be called your son make me like one of your hired men.” (v. 19)

True repentance never says, “Okay, God, I’ve jumped through your hoops, now it is time for you to restore me.” It never demands anything. The repentant heart seeks restoration of the broken relationship on any terms, with a posture of lowliness and unworthiness. The person who balks at the idea of taking steps to prevent future temptation because he is afraid he may not be happy living that way gives indication that his repentance is not real.

Signs of true repentance

Urge the counselee to honestly ask himself these questions:

1. Have I awakened from the spiritual stupor that got me here?
2. Have I confessed to those I hurt and to God?
3. Are those people satisfied that I have come to grips with how much damage my sin has done?
3. Am merely turning away from the sin, or am I turning away from the sin toward the Father?
4. Do I have an insistent drive to be clean before God right now?
5. Is there a strong distaste for that sin?
6. Is there a healthy fear of God—taking His commands seriously?
7. Is there a longing for fellowship with godly people?
8. Is there a strong zeal for God’s honor and glory?
9. Is there an unreserved, unqualified, unequivocal willingness to give up the sin by cutting off access to future temptation?

The last sentence of 2 Corinthians 7:11 is wonderful: “At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.” How could they prove themselves innocent in the matter? Were they not guilty of the sin? Obviously they were—otherwise they wouldn’t have needed to repent. So they were guilty, but now they are innocent. How? They are now innocent, because repentance brings forgiveness. Their guilt was transferred to Christ. Once a person has repented and turned back to the Lord, he does not have to live with oppressive feelings of regret and sorrow anymore. What a blessed truth!

Assessing Repentance

In church “discipline”⁸ the process is to continue until the sinner repents, at which point the goal is reached and discipline is over. It is necessary, then, to understand what repentance looks like. We cannot see into people’s hearts, yet it is our job to determine whether or not a person has repented (otherwise we cannot know whether to continue with the next step in the Matthew 18 process).

Since we do not have the ability to see into another person’s the heart, Scripture teaches us to detect repentance by words and deeds. If a person claims to be repentant and is willing to take necessary steps toward preventing future temptation, we must regard him as truly repentant – even if there are repeated failures and stumbling.

Luke 17:4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

Acts 26:20 I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Seeking a Repentant Heart

In some cases, upon hearing what Scripture teaches about true repentance the person will say, “I wish I were truly repentant, but I do not see those qualities in my life. How do I become repentant?” Here are some steps:

⁸ “Church discipline” is not the best term to describe the process Jesus commanded in Mt.18:15-20. The purpose is not punishment, but restoration. A better description would be “Church restoration.”

1. Pray for it

Repentance is an act of the will, but it is also sovereignly granted by God. Ask God to break your heart over your sin and grant you repentance.

2 Timothy 2:25 Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth....

2. Use God's chastisement to generate fear of Him

The pain of regret, the sense of distance from God's presence, Scripture becoming just print on a page rather than satisfying nourishment to the soul, prayers seemingly bouncing off the ceiling – all these can be expressions of God's displeasure. When we have sinned egregiously against God and have not repented, it is good to interpret those kinds of hardships as expressions of God's displeasure with us.

3. Consider God's patience and kindness

Romans 2:4 do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

Think about how much kindness and patience God has shown you even as you were sinning against Him. Thinking about His kindness in the face of our rebellion should break our hearts.

4. Immerse yourself in God's Word

1 Corinthians 14:24 But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be thoroughly examined by all, and the deep things of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"⁹

The prophecies have been preserved today in written form—the New Testament (2 Peter 1:19-21). God's Word has the power to convince a person that he is a sinner (v. 24). It puts both the sin and the person's guilt right out on the table in clear daylight.

Second, the person is "thoroughly examined" (v. 24), laying bare "the deep things of his heart." (v. 25). When repentance is shallow or halfhearted it may be that the person is focusing on the actions only and has not consider the "deep things" – subtle motives, sinful attitudes, selfish biases, etc.

But when those things are exposed by the Word of God the effect is to cause the person to "fall down and worship God" in humility and brokenness (v. 25).

5. Fast.

In the Old Testament, people were judged not on the basis of their sinfulness but according to whether they would humble themselves once confronted with their sinfulness (Exod. 10:3; 2 Chron. 7:14, 30:11, 36:12; Jer. 44:10; Dan. 5:22, 2 Chron. 12:6-12, 33:11-13). One way of humbling our own hearts is by fasting. In 1 Kings 21 Elijah confronted Ahab, the most wicked of the wicked kings of Israel, and pronounced judgment.

Ps.35:13 I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting

Going without food, in and of itself, means nothing. Going without food as an empty religious ritual is offensive to God. Going without food to punish yourself for your sin is a mockery of Jesus' work on the cross. Going without food with the right attitude, however, can help a person humble his heart before God and pave the way for true repentance.

Assessing Repentance

Even with all the principles Scripture supplies describing repentance, assessing whether repentance is genuine is not always easy because our repentance, like any other act of righteousness, is never all that it should be. We fall short. Some of the marks of repentance are clear; others are questionable. Judging the genuineness of someone's repentance, then, is particularly difficult. If a person claims to be repentant but shows no fruit at all, that should not be regarded as true

⁹ Author's translation

repentance. But how *much fruit* must be shown?

1. Set the standard high for yourself and low for others

Each person should err on the side of suspicion with his own repentance, and err on the side of grace with others.

2. Make the standard clear

Very often when one person in the church is accusing another of unrepentance there is no clear standard of what would be accepted as true repentance. The accuser must always be able to describe to the sinner exactly what would be accepted as repentance.

3. Focus on the present

If the person's sin was in the distant past, and it is not ongoing now, if the person acknowledges that it was wrong, accept that and the fact that the sin is not ongoing as genuine repentance.

The most important marker of repentance is the actions of the person's life. It is difficult to assess those actions immediately after the sin, so the person's words and sorrow and resolve are the main indicators at the time of confession. When the sin is in the past, however, actions can be assessed, and the clear track record since is more significant than the apparent level of sorrow.

Self-Forgiveness?

The problem of self-condemnation

Many times the problem seems to be just the opposite of unrepentance. The person has repented, but still feels condemned. The guilt feelings persist – even to the point of having a paralyzing effect on the person's walk with the Lord.

Some even use self-condemnation as a strategy for attaining greater success in the Christian life – attempting to punish themselves through intensifying feelings of guilt and failure. According to Scripture, however, self-condemnation is a problem that needs to be solved. (1 Jn.3:21-22) Guilt feelings that drive a person to repentance and to seek nearness to God are good; but self-condemnation that paralyzes and causes the person to be reluctant to draw near to God with boldness and confidence is bad.¹⁰ If all one's prayers are nothing but self deprecation, that does not lend itself to an intimate relationship. Once an offense has been fully forgiven, continual groveling harms, rather than helps the relationship.

Furthermore, self-condemnation is an effort to place one's self on God's throne as the ultimate Judge. It is a refusal to accept His verdict in favor of one's own verdict.

The solution secular psychology offers to the problem of self-condemnation is self-forgiveness. Many Christian counselors have accepted this unbiblical idea as well. "God has forgiven you; now you need to learn to forgive yourself." Nowhere does Scripture call us to forgive ourselves, because the very idea of self-forgiveness is nonsense. Forgiveness is the canceling of a debt and a willingness to absorb the loss. It is nonsense to speak of cancelling a debt to oneself by absorbing that debt oneself!

Telling a person that the solution is for him to forgive himself only perpetuates the error that is causing the problem in the first place. The error is his belief that he, rather than God, is the ultimate Judge. Urging him to forgive himself only reinforces that false belief.

The solution to self-condemnation is found in 1 John 3.

1 John 3:19-20 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his

¹⁰ The New Testament is filled with passages that speak of the importance of having boldness and confidence in approaching God in prayer. Jesus devoted an entire parable to that point (Lk.11:1-13). See also...

1 John 5:14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

2 Corinthians 3:4 We have such confidence through Christ before God.

Ephesians 3:12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Hebrews 3:14 We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence

Hebrews 10:19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near ... ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

presence 20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

When our hearts condemn us the solution is to preach to our hearts and convince them that God is greater than our hearts. When our feelings say one thing and God's Word says something different, God's Word is right and our heart is wrong. God's assessment trumps ours. And God's assessment is that when we have repented the guilt is gone.

It is Satan who continues to accuse and condemn us after we have repented and have been forgiven. Self-condemnation is nothing less than joining the Accuser in his work. Satan's aim is to destroy the work of God in our lives, limit our intimacy with Him and boldness in prayer, and paralyze us in ministry. When we submit to Satan's efforts to condemn us the solution is not self-forgiveness, but rather repentance of our failure to trust in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Many times when there is ongoing, crippling anxiety over past sin it is because the person does not trust God with regard to His perfect plan in the past. God could have prevented the sin, but He chose not to. He has a perfect purpose in all that He does and all that He allows. And while there may be bitter consequences from a past sin, we can trust God that He knew what He was doing when He chose not to prevent that particular sin, and as bitter as the consequences are, the good that God is accomplishing through that past action is so marvelous that it dwarfs the size of the evil.

When there is no repentance

In the tragic case of hardened refusal to repent the counselor must follow the Lord's command in Matthew 18:15-18 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. Bring one or two witnesses and try again to bring him to repentance with a humble, gentle attitude. (Gal.6:1) If he still will not repent, take the matter to the church and allow the entire assembly to humbly call him to repentance. If he continues to persist in sin even then, put him out of the assembly.