

Confession, Repentance, and True Change Part 2

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[0 : 0 0] If you've ever seen the movie Superman Returns, it came out a few years ago. Lois Lane has written an article. She's won the Pulitzer for it, and the title of the article is Why the World Doesn't Need Superman.

And at one point in the film, Superman takes Lois up into the sky over the city, and once they're up there, he says, what do you hear? She listens, and she says, nothing.

And Superman says, I hear everything. You wrote that the world doesn't need a Savior, but every day I hear people crying out for one.

We live in a society where many people have written and many people believe that we no longer need a Savior, that we have progressed, that we have evolved, that, frankly, we've outgrown the need for myths and fairy tales.

And yet every day people are crying out for a Savior. As we struggle to face the coronavirus pandemic and all of the economic strain that that has created for the world, as we struggle to come to terms with racial trauma and injustice in our society and all of the pain and division that that has caused, many people out there right now don't believe that they need a Savior.

[1 : 2 2] They say that we don't need a Savior. They say we've moved beyond that. And yet every day they're crying out for a Savior. And for that reason, we've been looking lately at the book of the Psalms in the Bible.

Because God's people have been crying out to their Savior for thousands of years. And those cries have been recorded as psalms. And so we've been looking at these psalms.

And last week we started looking at Psalm 32. And Psalm 32 is all about the fact that our Savior, Jesus Christ, makes it possible for us to deal with sin and brokenness once and for all.

And only Jesus makes it possible for us to deal with sin and brokenness once and for all. And so last week we talked about the reality of sin. And then we talked about the difference between our attempts to cover up our sin and the blood of Jesus as the ultimate covering for sin.

So that was last week. That was part one. This week is part two. We're going to continue looking at this psalm. And we're going to talk about true change. Once we've come to Jesus and confessed our sin, what does a life look like where true change is possible?

[2 : 3 6] And so we're going to ask two questions of this psalm. First, why is change necessary? If God loves me as I am and accepts me exactly as I am when I come to him and confess to him, then why is change necessary?

And then the second question is, how do we do it? So let's pray and then we'll open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that even when we say that we don't need a Savior, even when we deny that we need a Savior, Lord, that when the world was saying that, you still sent a Savior.

And it's because of him and because of your promise that he's here with us now that we open your word in confidence, knowing that you can speak to us. And it's our desire not just to understand these words, but to see our Savior face to face.

And it's in this hope that we pray. Amen. So first of all, why is change necessary in the Christian life? Verse 2 of this psalm says, Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity.

The Bible has a very complex view of human nature. On the one hand, the Bible says that human beings are capable of extraordinary beauty, extraordinary goodness, extraordinary creativity.

[3 : 57] And that's because we're created in the image of a God who is like that. We were made to bear his image by creating and building and bringing beauty and goodness into the world.

So that's a part of what it means to be a human being. But the Bible also says, and as Paul says in Romans chapter 1, when we exchanged the worship and the glory of God for the worship and the glory of created things, when we began to worship things God made instead of God, that twisted something deep inside us.

Along with our capacity for beauty and goodness and creativity, we have a brokenness, a bentness in our very nature.

And this is what the Bible means by the word iniquity. Iniquity is more than just doing bad things. It's more than just breaking the rules. Iniquity is something that is in our character.

It's a bentness in our nature. Dorothy Sayers describes it as a deep interior dislocation at the very center of human personality.

[5 : 10] The poet W.H. Auden called it the error bred in the bone. Both of these convey the same idea. The Christian understanding of human nature says that you're simultaneously a reflection of God's glory, and yet there is an error that has been bred into our bones.

It's a part of our nature. The philosopher Michael Ruse is a well-known atheist, and he's very open about his atheism, and yet at one place he writes, I think Christianity is spot on when it comes to original sin.

How could one think otherwise? And then here's what he goes on to say. How could one think otherwise when the same people who produced Beethoven or Goethe or Kant also embraced Hitler and participated in the Holocaust?

Only the Christian understanding of human nature could make sense of that. I don't think any other worldview or philosophy even comes close. Consider some of our great cultural icons.

Consider someone like Gandhi, for instance. Gandhi is one of the most famous cultural icons and leaders of our time, and he was a pioneer of passive, nonviolent civil disobedience.

[6 : 30] He gave his entire life to fighting for independence in India. And yet Gandhi was also blatantly racist toward black South Africans, and Gandhi repeatedly forced his teenage nieces to sleep in the nude with him.

And so Gandhi's a complicated figure. Consider somebody like Einstein, one of the great geniuses of our era. But he repeatedly cheated on his wife.

He had an affair with his cousin and then cast her aside to have affairs with numerous other younger women. And then when his son began to manifest the early signs of schizophrenia, he abandoned his son in a mental institution and never visited him once.

The biography says his son died in miserable conditions. Consider someone like Martha Washington, who was our nation's first lady.

She set the tone for all of the first ladies in our country, but she also owned more than four times the number of slaves that George did when they were married.

[7 : 38] And you look at this list, and frankly, I could go on and on and on and on, but I don't want to distract from the point. My point is not to discredit anyone.

My point is actually to discredit everyone. I want to discredit everyone. You know, right now, people are tearing down monuments because we have monuments of people who are racist or were slave owners, and I totally get it.

But as I've been thinking about it this week, I've been wondering, who should get a monument? Is there anyone out there who deserves a monument to be built to celebrate their life?

Because inside every cultural icon, inside every great hero, inside every saint that we celebrate in our culture, if you dig down deep enough, you will find iniquity because it's been bred into our bones.

It's there. So maybe you are somebody who's passionate about caring for the poor and the vulnerable. Maybe you've given your life to that, but maybe you also ruthlessly criticize your spouse.

[8 : 50] Maybe you're someone who loves your wife and your children more than anything you would lay down in traffic for them, and yet at the same time, you regularly fantasize about having affairs.

Maybe you're someone who is extremely generous with your money, and yet when somebody crosses a line with you or offends you, you refuse to forgive them.

Every single human being reflects both God's glory and goodness and beauty and also the bentness, the twistedness of iniquity.

As Alexander Solzhenitsyn famously wrote, the line separating good and evil passes not through states nor between classes nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.

The line of good and evil passes through every human heart. So back to our original question, why is change necessary? Because you know in your heart that you were created for glory, and you know that you were created to bring beauty and goodness and truth into this world.

[10 : 07] You know in your bones that that's why you're here. And yet you will not be able to do that if iniquity rules your heart. You will not be able to fulfill that purpose.

Your heart could be compared to a garden, and if you've ever tried to garden, you know that gardens have the capacity to produce life and beauty and fruit and goodness.

That's what a garden is by design. And yet if you know anything about gardens, they also have weeds. And if you leave a garden untended, over time what happens is that the weeds will slowly choke all of the life out of the garden.

The weeds will take over. And it's the same with our hearts and our lives. There is no position of neutrality. You are either actively fighting against the weeds, you're actually fighting against iniquity, or it is taking over.

It's taking over your heart, it's taking over your life, and it's choking the life out of you. So that's why change is necessary. So how do we do it?

[11 : 17] Our second question. Well, the first step in any kind of change, the first step is to admit that there's a problem. The first step in Alcoholics Anonymous, the 12-step recovery program, the first step says this, we admitted that we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.

And anyone in recovery, if you ask anyone in recovery, and those of you who are in recovery, you know what I'm talking about. Anyone in recovery will tell you that admitting this is the foundation for change, that there can be no real lasting change in your life without step one, without this admission.

You have to admit that you have come to love and depend on alcohol so much that it's wrecking your life. You have to cut through all of the denial.

You have to cut through all of the rationalization. You have to cut through that voice in your mind that says, oh, I'm still in control. I can have one drink. I can keep it under control. You have to cut through all of that and realize I'm powerless over this, and it's destroying everything I love.

Now, this comes straight out of the Christian gospel. The first thing that needs to happen before real change is possible is that we need to admit that change is necessary.

[12 : 37] Before you can solve a problem, you have to admit that there is a problem. And the fact that we love and worship anything other than God, that fact is wrecking our life.

Now, you may not look around in your life right now and see any wreckage. Maybe your life looks great. Maybe you're happy. Maybe you're doing very well. But that will not last. When push comes to shove, when everything is said and done, if that doesn't change, it's going to wreck your life.

It's going to wreck your eternal life. So we have to make this confession. We have to admit this truth. And admitting it can be one of the hardest things that we do.

Many people don't get past this first step. And the reason is what we see at the end of verse 2. The reason it's so hard, notice verse 2 says, Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

See, that's talking about self-deception. Self-deception. We have a whole array of advanced defenses that keep us from having to admit the depth of our sin.

[13 : 48] Just imagine each one of us. Inside, we have our heart, and then we have a team of highly trained Ivy League lawyers who are ready to come out and defend us as soon as we think our ego might be under attack.

And so there are a number of strategies that we employ. One of the ways that we hide from having to admit our iniquity is we hide behind blame, and we hide behind the sins of other people.

We talked about this a little bit last week, but it's worth revisiting. I can't tell you how many times people reach out to me and say, I'd love to come in and meet for counseling. I have some things that I'd like to work through in my life.

And I say, okay, and then we meet, and they spend the entire time laying out all of the reasons why all of their problems are somebody else's fault. And I find myself wondering, why am I talking to you if you have no agency in your own life?

Right? So blame, a fortress of blame can be a wonderful way to hide from the truth of our iniquity. We can also hide behind self-justification. We can develop elaborate explanations and reasons why everything that we did was only from the best intentions and that we only meant it this way.

[14 : 57] And if we could just be understood and heard, it would become clear that we're not actually in the wrong. We can also hide behind self-pity. Right? As real as pain can be, it can also become an excuse that allows us to avoid taking responsibility for the choices that we've made.

And so these are just some of the strategies that our team of lawyers can employ. And this is far easier. It's far easier for us to sit behind that team of lawyers feeling like victims than it is to actually face up to the truth about the sin in our lives and the choices that we've made.

And yet, unless we do that, we will never change. We will never change. And this is why verse 7 is so important. We ask, well, how can I possibly face the reality that there may be a twisted bentness to my very nature?

How could anybody possibly admit that? And the answer comes in verse 7. It says, the psalmist prays to God, you are a hiding place for me. You're a hiding place for me.

This is not just poetic language. This is actually pointing us to the truth of the gospel. Paul says something very similar in Colossians 3, verse 3. He says that if you're a Christian, your life is hidden with Christ in God.

[16 : 22] Your life is hidden with Christ in God. And the gospel is the truth that Jesus Christ lived the life that we should have lived.

Meaning, you can look at every great cultural icon, every great cultural hero. If you dig down deep enough, you will find iniquity. Not so with Jesus.

He had all of the most powerful people in the region. The Roman authorities, the religious leaders, everybody looking to discredit him. They found nothing. They found nothing.

The best that they could do was to attribute his miracles to Satan. Because they couldn't find anything else. And they couldn't deny the reality of the miracles.

So the best they could do is say, well, these miracles must be coming from Satan. Satan must be healing people and restoring sight and raising people from the dead. That argument didn't hold very much water, frankly.

[17 : 19] But Jesus Christ lived the life that we should have lived. And then the gospel says that Jesus died the death that we deserve to die because of our iniquity. So that God would no longer count our iniquity against us.

Because our iniquity, our sin, had been put to death with Jesus Christ on the cross. And what that means is that when we come to Jesus and we confess our sin to him.

And we point to the cross. And we ask for God's forgiveness based on the cross. What happens is that Jesus not only forgives us, but our lives are joined with him.

We are hidden in him. Which means we no longer have to hide behind blame or defensiveness or justification or self-pity. God becomes our hiding place.

That means that whenever our sin is exposed, whenever we struggle to face the reality of iniquity in our lives, we can point to the cross. And we can say it was dealt with there once and for all.

[18 : 21] So we have to admit the truth of our iniquity. And the courage to do that comes from the gospel. And having God as our hiding place.

I can boldly and ruthlessly face the truth of my sin because I know it's been dealt with on the cross. That's the first part of change. The second part of change is that then we have to surrender our lives fully to God.

It says in verse 8, and this is now the voice of God speaking back to the psalmist and the congregation. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.

I will counsel you with my eye upon you. There's this old Latin phrase, *quorum Deo*, that refers to the idea that we live all of our lives before the face of God.

That's what *quorum Deo* means. We live all of our lives before the face of God. In other words, there's no part of our lives that is held back. There's no part of our lives that is concealed from God.

[19 : 22] He sees everything about us. He knows everything about our hearts. And so the only way to overcome iniquity, the only way to tear those weeds out of the garden, is to live all of life before the face of God and to submit in all ways to God's will.

And the way that we do that is by reading and applying Scripture to our lives. Now, this is basic Christianity 101, but I tend to find that this is the thing we need to come back to more than almost anything else other than the gospel itself.

As you read Scripture, as you study Scripture, as you hear Scripture being taught, as you read books that expound upon Scripture, we need to constantly be looking at this not as an intellectual exercise, but as an opportunity to hold our lives up to the standard of God's Word, to allow God's Word to be like a light that illuminates sin, that helps us see the weeds amidst the fruit, and that gives us the strength to tear those weeds out.

And this is the only way to identify those weeds. It's the only way to be able to zero in on them, is by submitting our lives to God's Word. And so if we take everything that we talked about last week, and we take what we've talked about this week, and we put it together, here's the cycle of growth in the life of Christians.

It begins with the fact, it begins with the truth, that God loves you, and He gave everything to gain you as His own. And because of that love, we want to be the kind of people that God created us to be.

[21 : 09] We want to be what God made us to be. And so we submit our lives to God, and we submit our lives to God's Word, and whenever we see sin in our lives, we see that as an opportunity.

We readily and joyfully confess that sin. And we do that because we know that God has already forgiven us, because God is our hiding place. The cross has dealt with our sin.

And then we repent, meaning we commit ourselves to resisting that sin in the future. We turn 180 degrees around, and we go the other way. And we do all of this knowing that God loves us more than anything else in the world, and that no matter how much we fail, or how much we succeed in our desire to change, God will never love us any more, or any less than He loves you right at this moment.

It all begins and ends with God's love. And in the middle is this cycle of confession and repentance that I think for many of us, we've realized is something that we need to do every single day, confessing and repenting, and confessing and repenting, and all the while, having God's grace spoken into our lives.

So the more we do this, and what you'll find is the more you do this, the more eager you will become to root out sin in your life, because it's no longer a place where you feel shame and guilt.

[22 : 38] What you begin to realize is these become opportunities for you to experience the love of God in tangible ways in your life. Sometimes when people tell me, I feel distant from God, it's been a long time since I've felt God's presence in my life, the first thing I'll ask them is, when's the last time you got down on your knees and confessed your sin?

When's the last time you repented? When's the last time you admitted that you actually need the cross in your life? One of the ways that I have most experienced this in my own life is in my marriage.

You know, one of the things about marriage is, marriage is a place where your sin is pretty much regularly on display. And, you know, I used to get highly defensive in arguments.

I would immediately send out the lawyers and they would mount an amazing defensive strategy and I would just hide behind the lawyers. But what I've realized over time is that when I'm doing that, I'm actually trying to be my own savior.

I'm trying to justify myself. I'm trying to save myself from my own sin. And I've realized how impoverished that response is. And it's really not driven by a love of God or a love of my wife.

[23 : 53] It's driven by a love of myself. And what I am realizing now, what I'm realizing bit by bit, is how to drop my defenses and actually listen to my wife.

It's a crazy idea. But what I'm learning is that as I become open to hearing and admitting my sin, as I become open to the fact that I need to hear this sometimes, what's happening is that my marriage is actually becoming a place where not only am I learning more about what it means to love my wife, but those are actually becoming moments where I'm learning more about what it means to be loved by God.

And I think I'm finally figuring out what it means to draw on the love of God in a way that allows us to love other people. For me, I'm finding that a lot in my willingness to listen to the truth of the ways that I've sinned and to rely on God's mercy and love and forgiveness to give me the courage to admit it.

And I think that this is a pattern that plays out in all of our relationships, not just marriage. It can play out in all of our relationships.

The last example I'll give, because I think it's a very timely and relevant example, is I think this very same thing needs to happen when it comes to the crisis around race in our country.

[25 : 21] And in particular, I'm talking to white Christians right now. I think one of the most important things white Christians can do right now, and one of the maybe the distinctly Christian ways that we can respond to all of this, is just to stop and to listen.

To stop. To stop arguing about the terminology. To stop arguing about the statistics. To stop all of the virtue signaling.

And for those of us who are doing it, all of the finger wagging at other white people. We just need to stop. We just need to get off social media. We need to stop and recognize the extraordinary pain and anger felt by many people of color all around us in our society.

And we need to be willing to listen and to receive that without sending out the lawyers. Without becoming defensive. Without trying to justify ourselves. We just need to listen.

And then we need to pray for God to reveal to us. Pray for God to reveal to you in your own heart ways that we may need to repent, confess and repent, both individually and corporately, for sins that have been committed against people of color in our society.

[26 : 40] By our ancestors and by us. By individuals and by systems that perpetuate injustice. And I'm praying that if we can just stop and listen, I'm praying that God might actually use this present crisis and this present pain to break people's hearts in our society over their own sin.

It may begin with race, but I pray that it doesn't end there. I pray that this is actually something that God uses to break our hearts over the truth of our sin in every area of our life.

And in that way, it may sound crazy, I'm actually praying that this may, in some ways, lead to a spiritual revival in our country. If you look at almost every great spiritual revival in Christian history began when people started confessing their sin in mass.

And I'm praying that that happens here. So true change is possible. It's extremely difficult, but it's possible. And it's only possible because of the gospel.

Because God is our hiding place. Because in the confidence of the cross, we can truly look at our sin, confess it, repent of it, and then seek to become more and more and more the men and women that God has created us to be.

[27 : 57] And because of the gospel, even though it's hard, and even though our sin is probably worse than we think, we also have the confidence of knowing that God's love is far greater than we ever dared imagine.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this. And we pray for our hearts, these mixtures of divinity and iniquity.

And we pray that you would give us the strength and the grace and the courage to root out the sin in our hearts, to tear out the weeds. And we pray that we in our lives and in our hearts would experience that life and that abundance and that beauty and that goodness that comes when we do the work of tearing out those weeds.

And we pray that this would not just be for our own benefit, but that it would enable us as people, as families, as friend groups, as the church, to be a part of the healing and the restoring of this world.

And the repairing of the social fabric, Lord. And we pray all of this that your name would be glorified. And we do pray for a revival, a revival of the Holy Spirit that begins when we go to our knees, Lord.

[29 : 11] And we pray this all in your Son's holy name. Amen.