

Bible

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- [0 : 0 0] I remember the night that I became a Christian very vividly. Even now, it's one of the nights that I look to as potentially one of the most overwhelming and significant nights in my life.
- As a 14-year-old boy, I cried that night. 14-year-old boys aren't supposed to cry, but I did. In fact, I wept that night. I was absolutely levelled and humbled by this incredible, unconditional love that God would show me in sending Jesus.
- I remember that even as a 14-year-old, I was pretty aware of the parts of my life that weren't particularly love-worthy. And even though I had great parents who loved me incredibly, there was clearly something special, something more about this love that God had for me.
- And so I was overwhelmed with gratitude. And at the same time, having for the first time understood how amazing God's love was, I was convicted and I was committed that from that point on, I was going to serve God in every second of every minute of every hour of every day of every week of every year that he gave me.
- I was going to be all in. And I remember it happened on a camp in January of 1996. I came home from that camp still buzzing, still on fire for Jesus, still enthusiastic to a fault.
- [1 : 2 6] I was ready to change the world. I was ready to be completely different. I was ready to leave my old life and my old sinful habits behind. And then I was on that same camp 12 months later.
- And I had a moment of just incredible guilt as I realised that all of that resolve and conviction that I had had, had just kind of worn off over the year.
- In fact, if I'm honest, by mid-February of that year, I was basically back where I'd started, back into the usual rhythms of life.
- And so this new me that I had resolved to be seemed like an embarrassing overstatement. I remember standing, I was in the same place.
- It was the same point on camp where they were inviting other people to become Christians, other people to respond to God's love. And I remember suddenly realising I hadn't arrived.
- [2 : 3 3] I wasn't this person that I thought that I was supposed to be. Now I knew and I believed that God loved me more than my weakness and failure and my sad attempts at following him couldn't undo that.
- But I also just felt pretty embarrassed that there was almost nothing in my life that said something had changed, that said now I belong to Jesus.
- And so the preacher is standing at the front of the room, 12 months later giving a similar message, talking about Jesus, inviting people to become Christians. And I'm sitting there thinking, something needs to change.
- I'm not where I'm supposed to be, but I can't do that because I've already done that. I've already done the becoming a Christian thing. So what am I supposed to do with my guilt?

Maybe you've heard Christian testimonies, stories of stuff, of how people became Christians, and they go something like, before I was a Christian, I was a jerk. Then I met Jesus, and now I'm amazing.

[3 : 41] That wasn't my story. Before I was a Christian, I was a jerk. Then I met Jesus, and 12 months later, I was still a jerk. And some of you might think that I'm still a jerk nearly 20 years later.

It wasn't my story. And so I was sitting there with this guilt, conscious that something wasn't right, but not sure what I was supposed to do with that. I figured I only had two options. I couldn't admit that I hadn't gone anywhere and start again.

That was too embarrassing. I couldn't admit that. So I figured my best hopes was either to play down how bad I still was and kind of act like I was doing better than I really was, or I could just try harder from now on and just have such a good year in year number two that kind of makes up for how bad I was in year number one.

I felt this pressure that if I was going to follow Jesus, I had to meet some kind of standard. I didn't want to be another one of those Christian hypocrites.

I figured I figured I needed to be as good, at least as good as the other Christians around me, who all looked like they were doing much better than me. And if I'm honest, what I actually thought I had to do was be like Jesus.

[4 : 57] I even had the wristband to remind me of it every day. WWJD, what would Jesus do? Nothing like what I was doing. I felt a pressure to be perfect.

And that's a pressure that a lot of Christians feel. That could even be a pressure that you're feeling right now as you attempt to follow Jesus, or as you figure out whether or not you want to follow Jesus, or you're allowed to follow Jesus, or it fits for you.

It could be the intimidation of feeling like, can I meet up to this standard? I mean, Christians never say you have to be perfect because that would sound ridiculous. It does sound ridiculous.

But think about the way that you respond to moral failure. When you come across sin in someone else, do you ever find yourself wondering whether or not they're really a Christian?

Do you find yourself looking around the room and kind of measuring who the better Christians are based on their level of goodness or morality? Or what about in your own life?

[6 : 08] When you discover something, some sin in your life, are you tempted to justify it, play it down as it's not such a big issue, kind of pretend like it's not there? Or maybe you feel the pressure to somehow up your game, try harder, make it up to God?

Does it get compounded by this fear that other people might find out? Find out what you're really like? Find out that you're not as great as you've been pretending to be?

Not as holy as you've been pretending to be? And so then you just do everything you can to cover it up. Keep it a secret. Try harder at church.

Put on a bigger show of godliness. And the pressure just builds. So where you're saying you're here and you're slowly doing this, and so it gets harder and harder to live up to a standard that you're getting further and further away from, and the pressure is building, and you're feeling more guilt, and you're driven to serve more or read your Bible more or give more, but inside you're just feeling horrible.

Somewhere along the line, we started to believe the lie that if we're going to follow Jesus, we have to be perfect. Or at very least, we've got to be better than most people.

[7 : 22] Better than the people out there. We started kind of expecting ourselves and other people to have arrived as Christians. To be like Jesus.

We read verses like the one that Deb read in 1 John 5. Have a look at it. It says, This is the message we've heard from him and declare to you. God is light. In him there is no darkness at all.

If we claim to have fellowship with him, and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. And so we look at a verse like that, and we go, God's light, and we can't have any darkness, so basically the only answer is we've got to be perfect.

That's not what it's saying. I mean, if you go just down to the next verse, verse 7, it says, 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.

So walking in the light, whatever it means, doesn't mean being perfect, because you still need to be purified by the blood of Jesus when you're in the light. So it's not saying that, but somehow we've grabbed verses like this and put a pressure on ourselves and on other people that if you're going to wear the Christian badge, you've got to be up here.

[8 : 33] You've got to be better. You've got to be putting on a show. And I want to start this series by saying really clearly that that is a poisonous lie.

That is absolute rubbish. If there is any part of that sentiment that sounds familiar for you, that resonates with you, if you feel even a little bit like there is a standard you have to meet for God to love you, for you to be valid as a Christian, you need to really listen today and through this series.

Jesus wants you to understand what he means when he says, my yoke is easy, my burden is light. Following Jesus is a journey.

It's about becoming something. It's about being slowly transformed. Christians are not finished products. They haven't arrived yet.

They're on a journey. Billy Graham, the famous evangelist, his wife Ruth, when she died, had these words put on her tombstone. End of construction.

[9 : 44] Thank you for your patience. Jesus describes following him like being on a narrow road, a road that leads to life, but being on the road is not the same as being at the end of the road.

Being on a journey is not the same as being at the destination that you're trying to get to. Anyone who has ever been on a road trip with kids, some of you guys in this room are still closer to being the kids on that road trip, know the haunting chorus of, are we there yet?

Are we there yet? Are we there yet? And after answering no for the thousandth time, as a parent, you start to try and get creative about how you might answer this. And so you come up with, well, we're on the way.

We're there. Or we're almost there. Or, you know, the euphemism, which is actually close to a lie, it's not about the destination, it's about the journey. That's rubbish. A journey is about the destination.

That's why it's a journey. It's about getting somewhere. Kids are pretty astute and they quickly work out that no matter how you spin it, being on the journey is not the same as being at the destination.

[10 : 48] The point of the journey is to get to the place that you want to get to and they know that you can use fancy, clever words and profound, seeming statements, but it's still not the same thing.

We are on a journey and so we shouldn't expect our life to be as if we're already at the destination, we're already finished. If you're a Christian, you haven't arrived yet.

You are between two points. Jesus says he will carry on the work till the destination, till completion, but that will happen at the end of the journey.

The completion will be heaven. The two points that define being a Christian are the cross. The first time you understand and encounter the fact that Jesus died so that you could be forgiven and you hand your sin over, that's the beginning of the journey and the end of the journey is heaven.

It's home. It's when finally you're with God, you're with him forever and in heaven you will be perfect. You will be sinless. It will be amazing.

[11 : 55] You will be just like Jesus but that is not a standard that he expects of anyone before then. That is not a bar that he is holding you to.

And as long as we keep expecting it of ourselves and each other, all we're doing is adding pressure and burdens in our lives and in the lives of other people that just don't belong there.

In fact, for some people who are trying to decide whether or not they should follow Jesus, it's this pressure, it's this standard that we add that deters them, that turns them away.

Jesus sounds great but I can't realistically live up to that perfection that the rest of you guys are apparently living up to. When we hold ourselves and others to this standard, for some Christians that's enough to crush them and make them give up because we've made following Jesus harder than it's supposed to be.

In fact, we've put an impossible task in there and so we're surprised when they feel so guilty that they decided just be easier to jump out and not have any standard to live by. Being a Christian means being unfinished.

[13 : 06] That means that every person in this room who is following Jesus is unfinished. That is not perfect. No one's got it all together. Every one of us is failing.

Every one of us is struggling to obey and love God the way he deserves. The issue is not if we will fail. It's what we do when we fail. That's the important thing.

Have a look at verse 8. If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. See, none of us, again, is claiming to be sinless.

I haven't heard any of you say and I probably will challenge you if you do, I'm sinless. I'm perfect. We don't say that explicitly but if we're not recognizing or acknowledging or confessing specific things regularly, we're more or less doing the same thing.

If we're not saying here's something I've done that I need forgiveness for, we're more or less saying I don't have anything that I need to say and ask forgiveness for. We're kind of claiming perfection and if you talk a big game like that, if you walk around with this persona of I've got this all sorted, I'm nailing it at following Jesus, people will expect you to back it up.

[14 : 27] So if you're not confessing sin, it's a reasonable assumption for the people around you to make that either you don't have any or at least you don't think you have any. And either way, that's a recipe for pressure on you because you've said here's where I'm traveling.

I'm nailing it. I'm perfect. And so people will be watching. And so if you make a mistake, it's even harder for you to admit it now because you've been saying, no, no, I'm up here. I don't make mistakes.

I'm doing it right. It's a recipe for pressure, for insecurity and ultimately for hypocrisy. And so you've got to ask yourself the question, why do you do that?

Why do we do that? Why do we try and act like we're doing better than we actually are? Especially as Christians. Christians, who is it that we're trying to impress?

The other failures who are sitting around us? We know we do it. It's why the world calls us hypocrites.

[15 : 36] Because we claim we're here and in reality we're nowhere near it. We know it's true because often people come into church who don't fit our moral code, maybe who have the self-awareness to realise that it's an impossible one and so they feel like they don't belong here.

But why do we do it? Why do we hold ourselves so rigidly to an impossible standard? Because it's not a pressure that God places on you.

The Bible never says it. Jesus never says, I'll save you, I'll die for you, I'll forgive you, I'll love you if you just meet this level of goodness. He doesn't even say, look, I'll love you even though you don't deserve it but from now on I'll only let you stay around if you start being a certain amount of goodness.

See, the power of sin, the power of failure is fear. It's fear of the judgment that might come if people knew what we were really like.

It's fear of what we might lose. Fear of what people might think of us. And it's a fear that Satan loves to grab hold of. Satan's sometimes known as the great accuser because when we fail he will push the button of insecurity that we already feel sometimes with God.

[17 : 08] He'll remind us of something that's actually true that we don't deserve to be loved by God. And then while we're conscious that we don't deserve it and he's reminded us that we're failing he'll just kind of put the pressure on and go, you may as well give up.

You're not anywhere near the standard anyway. Or he'll go, you better keep trying harder because if you stay down there maybe God won't actually love you. So many Christians, people who are trying to follow Jesus, live with that pressure when they fail.

with that fear, how would God respond if he really knew what I was like? How would the people around me treat me if they really knew that I wasn't as holy as I pretend to be?

On the outside their commitment levels might be increasing. They're trying harder and harder because they're so scared and inside they're just petrified that at any moment God's going to stop loving them.

But that's not how God responds to failure. That's not what he's like. Look at verse 9. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

[18 : 25] Jesus responds to your moments of sin and shame and failure with a gentle invitation to come back. Jesus calls you to confess to him and says I will forgive you.

Not I might forgive you, not depending on how many bad things you've done leading up to this, whether or not this is a track record, whether or not we've been over this before. He says I'm faithful, I'm just and I will forgive you and cleanse you.

So often we let our failure become a moment of insecurity and fear when it comes to following Jesus but we actually don't have to.

It doesn't have to be that. In his grace God has made your weakness, your imperfection, your low moments an opportunity to deepen your security in him, to grow your confidence in just how much he loves you.

One of the things that I love to do with my two boys is building with blocks. We have like three different kinds of blocks and we make all sorts of towers and hotels and tunnels and whatever else.

[19 : 41] Sometimes they ruin my excellent creations but I'm growing in my grace to forgive them because they're little. But something I've noticed in particular in my eldest son Bailey is this fierce independence.

He has a deep desire to be able to do whatever it is that he's trying to do on his own. He doesn't want me to get involved and so he'll be sitting there and he'll be struggling to get this tower to balance or to get these two pieces to connect properly and I'll offer would you like me to help?

He will quickly let me know that he doesn't need my help and then I'll watch as he continues to struggle, still unable to get this thing to balance or these blocks to connect.

I'll watch for as long as I can physically restrain myself for and then I'll feel the need to offer again and so I'll be like are you sure you don't want daddy to help? Daddy can help you with that, I can do that.

He'll reject my offer a little bit more aggressively second time around and he's getting increasingly agitated and frustrated but the struggle here is that what he's trying to do, his desire there is actually good.

[20 : 51] he wants to be capable, he wants to broaden his skills, he doesn't want to always have to ask for help but that good desire becomes toxic when he lets it stand between him and the one thing that can actually solve his problem and in this situation that's me sitting there desperately wanting to get involved and fix the issue.

in the same way we have this right desire to please God when we're following him. We have this good desire to live up to a standard that honors him, we have this correct response of shame and guilt when we do the wrong thing but those responses and those desires become toxic when they drive us away from the one thing that can actually help us in our failure.

The only way that you will ever deal with sin in your life is through the death of Jesus in your place. No amount of trying harder and he's saying every time you fail just come back to me.

You don't have to do it by yourself. Have a look at chapter 2 verse 1 it says my dear children I write this to you so that you will not sin that's the end game but if anybody does sin we have an advocate with the father Jesus Christ the righteous one.

he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. The only thing that can deal with your sins is the death of Jesus and it is enough to deal with every sin you have done could possibly ever do and not just you but the sins of the whole world.

[22 : 33] This is written to people who are already following Jesus. It says my dear children those who have already started the journey who have discovered the cross who have asked for forgiveness at some point and it's saying don't leave confession behind.

Don't leave confession at the beginning of the journey and try and do the rest of it out of kind of good intentions and hard work. Every time you sin there is still grace on offer.

no matter how big or how bad there is forgiveness offered freely and the only thing that could stand between you and that offer of grace and forgiveness is your own pride.

Is your own attempts to try and self-justify. Is your insistence to hold on to your mistakes and try and make up for them. Whether it's playing down your sin as if it doesn't matter or whether it's trying to make up for it.

So long as you somehow believe that God needs you to be good enough for him to love you, you will always be crushed by the standard that you are trying to reach and you will never live up to.

[23 : 54] If you're following Jesus, God knows what you're like. The Bible says that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Before we had a chance to try and impress him, Christ had already decided to die for us.

Before the creation of the world, God chose to send his son so that we could be forgiven. God knows who you are. He knows your deepest, darkest secrets better than you do. And he's decided to love you anyway.

When you fail, grace is on offer. And again, this isn't an if you fail issue. This is a when you fail. When you fail, God offers grace and he offers forgiveness.

And this matters more than just trying to relieve the discomfort that goes with being guilty. This is more than just trying to take the pressure off so that you don't have to worry about the fact that you've done something shameful and embarrassing.

It's not just about escaping guilt. coming back to God and confessing sin is a chance to encounter God's grace again and again.

[25 : 03] And that is essential if you are going to do this journey home well. It is so important that we confess sin because it is an assurance-building activity.

I'll say that again. Confessing sin is an assurance-building activity. Confessing sin is scary because you're airing your dirty laundry. And so often we don't want to do it. And it comes from that place of fear.

Will God still love me? But he's actually designed confessing sin to be a chance for you to be more secure on the other side of it. I mean, think about what you did when you first became a Christian.

Now, you confessed sin. It might have been vague. It might have been kind of generic and not particularly well expressed. But on some level, when you became a Christian, you said, God, I don't deserve it, but I want you to forgive me.

I want you in my life. And he said yes. And he did forgive you. And he did wash you. And he did purify you. And every step since then, if you're following Jesus, has been a response to the love that you experienced in that first moment.

[26 : 14] Every step has been fueled because you tasted God's grace there and it was enough to drive you forward. regular confession draws you back to that first experience.

Engages you again in how incredible it was to be loved and forgiven for the very first time. See, it's kind of like a long-distance relationship. If you don't speak to or see the person that you're in love with, it's inevitable that over a period of time, the power that that love has to drive your actions and your emotions is going to slowly decrease.

Now, it might still be sufficient that you remain faithful and committed to that person, but it's never going to have the same force or energy or power as is possible if the distance is removed and you get to see and enjoy that person face-to-face, day in, day out.

Now, in the same way, that first experience of God's grace, when you said, I'm in, I want to follow you and you learnt that you were loved unconditionally and irreversibly, that's enough to get you home to heaven.

I want to say that really clearly. If you've taken step one, God promises he'll make sure you take all the steps until you get to heaven. But God doesn't want you to just kind of survive life and then collapse over the finish line and think, oh, thank God that's over.

[27 : 42] That's not his desire for you. He wants your life to be amazing. He wants you to gain momentum in your Christian walk. He wants every day to be a day where you are more confident in how much God loves you, more fearless to stand up in a world that thinks maybe you're crazy for following him because you know he loves you, you know nothing's going to change and you are getting more and more excited for how good heaven's going to be when you get that love with nothing in the way, with no restraints.

And for that to be your reality, you need to keep tasting grace. You need to keep growing your appetite for grace and confession, regular confession of sin is God's gift to you for you to taste and experience his grace.

It's a tool he's given you. If you feel insecure, if you feel unsure about whether or not you're going to spend eternity in heaven, confession is a tool that God has given you to help you grow in your confidence, in your certainty.

It's an invitation to come back again and again and again and find him faithful. You need to dish up your dirty laundry.

You need to lay out the things that you are embarrassed about, the most shameful sins in your life to him in confession and you know what you'll discover? According to this verse, that he's faithful, he's just and he'll forgive you again and again and again and again and again and again.

[29 : 23] It doesn't run out. He is faithful and just and he will continually forgive you and purify you. And as you find him forgiving you, your confidence will grow for next time.

Because I remember that when I dumped that thing, he forgave me and he still loved me and so I'm confident he's going to do this one. And then suddenly you've got this track record. God just keeps coming through and keeps loving me and so you get more confident and more excited even to acknowledge that you have stuffed up, to acknowledge that you need his help because you are so confident that his love is more powerful than your pride or your lust or your greed or your laziness or your selfishness.

confess. Every time you confess, it's like reliving in mini version what it was like to become a Christian for the very first time.

It's like tasting that incredible love of God again for the very first time. That first time joy over and over again, driving you to love God and serve him and confess to him absolutely secure in God's reliable and effective love.

But for that to happen, you've got to confess sin. Regularly. Specifically. Jesus says he who's forgiven much loves much.

[30 : 48] He who's forgiven little loves little. And so if you're not asking for forgiveness, if you're not regularly recognizing that you need it, acknowledging things that you've done that are wrong and handing them over and being forgiven, then his love is going to seem kind of small, kind of distant, maybe inadequate in your life.

You might find yourself like I did a year into following Jesus. Sure, I was a Christian but I wasn't going anywhere. So often, if you find yourself with a lack of energy for God, a lack of enthusiasm, a lack of drive, you can trace it back to only ever having an entree-sized encounter with God's grace.

grace. Just grabbing that bit at the beginning and thinking that should hold me for the rest of the day. God is inviting you to a grace buffet. He's inviting you to feast on grace.

All you can eat grace. Just keep coming back every time you fail and he will keep loving you and forgiving you and getting you more excited for heaven when you will not have to do it anymore because his grace will have finished his work and removed all those bits that you're embarrassed about, all the things that bring you shame.

If you want to be someone who runs the path God has for you, who thrives, who flourishes on this journey between the cross and heaven, if you want to be somebody who is certain, certain in the hope of heaven, fearless in the face of opposition, you've got to be somebody who walks in the light, who walks honestly, who regularly and specifically confesses to God and finds him faithful and just to forgive.

[32 : 33] We as a church here at St. Paul's have a core value. It's something that likes to define the culture of who we are. A core value called humble authenticity. That's where this hits us as a group.

We want to be a community that doesn't fake how we're going, but is honest with one another.

Because when you're honest, that gives me permission to be honest. When I'm honest, you don't have to live up to my standard because my standard's not particularly high or impressive.

What you see in me is an amazing God who forgives even people like Sam. And you think, actually, I belong here too. We want to be a community that is so humble and so honest about what we're doing that people don't turn up and think, wow, what a moral and good group of people.

They think, wow, their God must be amazing if he can love them. And also, maybe that means he would love me too. Maybe that means the people who walk in here fresh out of prison, the people who walk in here fresh out of having an affair, fresh out of supporting a drug habit, fresh out of all the sort of things that maybe make us blush and embarrassed and are not in our world, our version of what we think good and bad is.

[34 : 00] If we would be honest, if we were regularly putting up a hand and going, I need God's grace as much today as I did the first day I started, maybe those people would get to discover the grace that we've found.

We regularly confess here at church. We say prayers together on the screen, we sing songs of confession, but there is the potential when we do that to just kind of dodge it, not engage it, say the words, oh yeah, God, I haven't been good enough, I haven't done the stuff I'm supposed to, yada, yada, yada, without actually going, no, no, no, what's going on in your own life, specifically.

If you want to taste grace, you've got to be honest. If you just say, hey God, I'm generally not good enough, that doesn't sting really, because everyone's not good enough. But if you say, hey God, I've been struggling with lustful thoughts, that feels embarrassing, that feels shameful, that's something you need grace for.

If you say, hey God, I've been really selfish with my money at the moment, that's maybe a bit embarrassing. If you say, hey God, I've been talking about some of these people who I'm sitting with in a way that doesn't honour them or you, that's embarrassing.

That's not something you want everyone to know, that's something you need grace for. Confession needs to be regular, specific, honest, and because of Jesus, it can be confident and even joyful.

[35 : 36] And so I'm going to finish up right now and the band's going to come up and they're going to play some songs and then they're going to lead us, but just as they begin, I want to encourage you, in fact more than encourage you, I want to push you, I want to say take this opportunity right now.

If your life has been surviving on the entree of grace, it's time to come to the buffet. It's time to be specific. As they play and as we sing and as we reflect, I want to challenge you, you don't have to say it to anyone else, although I would say there is some real gifting that God has given to us in brothers and sisters who walk with us.

But for right now, maybe for step one, just confess to God. Just one thing. If you're sitting there and you can't think what that would be, maybe that's your starting point.

Maybe you've gotten so good at playing down sin in your life that you can't even recognise the things. Remember, you're unfinished. There's stuff you need to confess. And so maybe step one is to say, God, open my eyes to recognise that I'm not there yet.

Give me the grace to see the things that I need grace for so that I can get more of your grace. Take this opportunity. Take the gift God has given you and find that again, He's faithful.

[36 : 56] He's just. And He will forgive.