



**By David Christensen**

There is a legend about a man who often went forward at revival services in the church and knelt at the altar in tears. He always loudly prayed, “Lord, take the cobwebs out of my life.” One Sunday morning, the pastor, tired of hearing the same old prayer, knelt down beside him and prayed, “No, Lord, Kill the spider.” Repentance does more than clean out the cobwebs. Repentance kills the spider. Some think that the spider is dead, and we must merely treat the spider as dead, but this misunderstands the problem of sin. The unregenerate person died, and a new person came to life, but the new person retains a sinful disposition that is very real. The Bible calls it our flesh. Mental gymnastics may claim that the spider is dead but both the spider, and we know better. To kill the spider, we must implement the three R’s of repentance – renunciation, restitution, and righteousness – which can only be accomplished by the grace of God through the power of the Spirit.

### RENUNCIATION

The New Testament commands us to *put to death the members of your earthly body, immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed, which amounts to idolatry* (Col. 3:5). Paul has just said in the previous verse (3:3) that we *have died* but still, we must put to death literally *the members that are upon the earth* and he goes on to list a representative sample.<sup>1</sup> By metonymy, Paul connects our body parts with the sinful acts they perform and tells us to execute those body parts – metaphorically speaking! Jesus expressed the same powerful imagery when, speaking about lust, he said: *If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right-hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to go into hell* (Mt. 5:29-30). Jesus was not speaking about mutilating ourselves but about mortifying our sins. Renunciation is

nothing less than execution. John Owen warns us to “be killing sin, or it will be killing you.”<sup>2</sup> Execution is not pretty. It is ugly. Execution is unpleasant. There is nothing idealistic or aesthetic about execution. Executions don’t leave us feeling warm and fuzzy. They are messy but effective.

Mortification of sin is the work of believers for it requires the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish (Rom. 8:13). Unbelievers are incapable of killing the sin principle for sin enslaves them, but believers have been freed from the slavery (Rom. 6:11) and must refuse to let sin rule their lives any longer (Rom. 6:12-14). Only believers have the power to say “no” to the sin principle and only because of the power of the Holy Spirit. We are freed from slavery but engulfed in a war against the sin principle that still resides in our beings. We are called to fight the sin in our souls persistently. We will never escape this battle with sin until sanctification merges into glorification and we are finally wholly sanctified. Until then we are to continue mortifying the sin in our lives by refusing to let sin master us. Mortification is not a ritual we perform. It is not accomplished through deprivation or mutilation of the body as if physical acts can kill sin in the soul. Mortification is a spiritual process of killing sin by the power we possess from the Holy Spirit. Mortification is the human side of sanctification. We must act to kill sin in our souls. John MacArthur defines it as “a way of life where Christians seek to throttle sin and crush it from their lives, sapping it of its strength, rooting it out, and depriving it of its influence.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul’s command in Colossians 3:5 requires decisive and painful action on our part to carry it out. I do not believe this is a single, once for all act as if we can put our sinful disposition to death with one slice of the executioner’s blade.<sup>4</sup> The parallel passage indicates an ongoing process of executing the sinful works of the body that can only be accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13). We must find practical ways to kill the sinful tendencies we see in our lives. When we are faced with sexual immorality, we must put it to death. When we are faced with impurity or lust, we must find ways to put them to death. Greed must be ruthlessly executed if we are to follow this command. We are not merely to control or inhibit these sins. We are not to be managers of the sinful nature that is so destructive to our spiritual lives. We are to be executioners, and the execution is an act of “personal determination” on our part.<sup>5</sup>

How do we carry out the execution? We need to be practical in our understanding of this principle or else the command will remain theoretical at best. Earl Wilson, whose story of personal repentance from sin helps us understand the process, explained that “bridges must be burned.”<sup>6</sup>

- The man addicted to pornography must ruthlessly destroy all pornographic materials in his home. He must put a filter on his computer and have his wife control the password so that he cannot access it without her control. He must avoid the video store. Send someone else to rent the family movie. He must stay as far away from all “adult entertainment” centers as he possibly can. Don’t even drive down the same street in his leisure time. Don’t even walk down the aisle where the explicit magazine covers are located. A single look can excite the lust all over again.
- The alcoholic must refuse to join his friends at a bar even to sip a soda. He has already proven that he cannot handle the temptation. No alcohol allowed in the house at all. A last look or “just a sip” must be eliminated. Many an alcoholic has

returned to alcohol with just one social sip at dinner. Kill the spider of alcohol by staying away from the friends who cannot understand your weakness and tempt you with their freedom.

- The adulterer must cut off all contact with the adulteress. There is no hope for restoring the marriage while ongoing contact continues. No telephone calls, emails or casual contacts should be tolerated. If you attend the same church go to another church. If you work in the same office, transfer. Many an affair has been rekindled into a raging fire by one last goodbye. If contact is necessary, have someone else present or acting as the messenger. Put to death the members of your body involved in sexual immorality.
- The liar must excise the temptation to lie through accountability. Ask someone to brutally hold you accountable to speak the truth. Every time – without exception - the truth has been “stretched,” “fudged,” or “embellished” the liar must contact the person to whom he lied and correct the lie. Those who struggle with pathological untruth can only correct the pattern with purposeful correction even for “minor” falsehoods. The process of correction changes the habit of lying by enforcing the habit of consequence.

## RESTITUTION

The Apostle Paul told King Agrippa at his trial that he had preached repentance to the Gentiles and that they should *repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance* (Acts 26:20). Jesus warned us to watch out for false teachers who pretend to be what they are not. The only way to tell what people are inside is to watch what they are outside. Jesus’ principle was simply, *you will know them by their fruits* (Mt. 7:16, 20). What people produce proves what people are. This reality is the foundational principle for determining repentance. John the Baptist made the connection between repentance and fruit explicit in his preaching. The sinner must *bear fruit in keeping with repentance* (Mt. 3:8; Luke 3:8). Deeds are the proof of repentance. What we do is more important than what we say.

Restitution is one of the primary fruits of repentance. Restitution comes in many shapes and forms, but the emphasis of repentance is always a desire to make right what has been made wrong through sin. This is not to say that restitution should slip into penance whereby we seek to earn back the favor lost through sin. The purpose of restitution is not intended to pay for the wrong. The purpose is to demonstrate by our works that we are truly repentant for what we have done. Restitution flows out of the hope we have in Christ to take care of our souls.

Zacchaeus shows us the simplest form of restitution. Tax collectors in Israel at the time of Christ were notorious for gaining wealth through extortion. The system virtually encouraged corruption since each tax collector was an independent contractor who paid the government the contract price for a tax territory. Then he extorted from the citizens all the profit he could gain after the contract was paid. Zacchaeus repented of his sin at the dinner where he welcomed Jesus despite the self-righteous critics of his day. He was a sinner, and he knew it. He made a public statement of restitution. *Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have*

*defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much* (Luke 19:8). Jesus approved this proof of repentance by saying, *today salvation has come to this house* (19:9). Paying back debts wherever possible is the simplest form of restitution. Many wrongs need to be corrected in this way. If we have stolen from the company or a friend, then we need to pay back what we have stolen. A college I know had gone bankrupt while owing back salaries to the faculty. The college reconstituted itself under a new name and administration and so did not legally owe the back debts, but the administration determined that all back debts would be paid in full because restitution was honoring to God. They did pay all back debts including salaries, and God has honored the decision in the lives of many.

Not all wrongs can be corrected by simple payments. Many wrongs have no easy solutions. Relationships shattered by sin are not quickly put back together. Trust is not easily restored. Restitution in these cases can take other forms. Feeling the hurt our sin has caused others can lead to our zeal at correcting the wrongs we have done to the relationship. Paul spoke of how the repentance of the Corinthians led to sorrow over how they had wronged him and the damage they had done to the church. They showed how devoted they were to him by the earnestness and zeal they demonstrated in quickly correcting all the damage that had been done (2 Cor. 7:8-12). True repentance opens our hearts to the hurts of others. A false repentance focuses on what has happened to us and seems oblivious to how this has hurt others or how we are hurting others by our actions now.

Sin has consequences, and not all consequences are erased by repentance. Repentance means that we accept the consequences that permanently change our lives as a means of restitution toward those we have wronged. Earl Wilson was a licensed Christian psychologist who became sexually involved with a former client. He tells his painful story of repentance and restoration in the book, *Restoring the Fallen*. In that book, he points out several excuses that sinners use to abort the painful process of true repentance and restoration. "I'm tired of dealing with all this pain." "I'm not the only sinner here." "I just want to get on with my life." One day he asked his therapist, "When is this going to be over?" The therapist replied, "Never!" Earl Wilson writes: "As hard as this may be to hear, it is brutally true. Sin irrevocably changes our lives. The consequences of past sinful choices are forever woven into the fabric of one's life."<sup>7</sup> We will never be the same again nor will we have the same relationships with those we have wronged as we did before the sin. This does not mean that there will be no healing. Healing will come when we follow God's guidelines, but the healing will be the healing that comes from surgery. The body will still have the scar where the scalpel cut out the sin. Part of restitution is to accept the consequences that will be with us forever as we grow into a new people who have experienced the pain of past sin and live with that reality in our present relationships.

There is a myth about sin that pervades our culture. All sin is equal is the lie that leads to false repentance. The Bible does not teach this doctrine. The Bible does teach that committing even one sin makes us all sinners and renders us eternally culpable before God as sinners (James 2:10-11), but this does not mean that all sin is equal. Some sins have greater social consequences than others. A man who privately covets his neighbor's speed boat has sinned, but his sin does not have the same social consequences as the man who steals the speed boat from his neighbor. The former is a sinner who needs God's forgiveness, but the latter will go to jail for his sin. A woman who lies about her age has sinned, but the sin does not have the social results that come

when a woman gives birth to a child born outside of marriage. The woman can repent and enjoy God's grace, but the child requires an ongoing commitment from the woman to deal with the consequences of her sin. A woman may repent of abortion, but the repentance does not restore the life of the aborted child. A man who commits murder may well experience God's saving grace when he repents of his sin, but he will still pay for the crime and must accept the consequences meted out by our legal system. Restitution means that we accept those consequences and live with the reality of what we have done for the rest of our lives.

Another form of restitution in a corporate setting is to acknowledge the correction process that leads to restoration in a church. The church has a responsibility to discipline sin in the fellowship (Mt. 18:15-20; 1 Thess. 5:12-15; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; Gal. 6:1-5). How is that process handled? It is not simply the gravity of the sin that is measured and punished. The issue around which discipline revolves is the issue of repentance, and one of the primary proofs of non-repentance is "resistance to reproof."<sup>8</sup> The person who is resistant to the correction process is demonstrating a lack of repentance. The tendency, when confronted with sin, is to become defensive. We are quick to point out other sins in the church when being faced with our sin. When the person with the beam in the eye is repenting it is not appropriate to point out the speck in the other person's eye. Sinners can become very unforgiving and bitter about the correction process in a church and are quick to point out the flaws they see as a form of resistance to the correction they don't want to face.

Restitution means that the sinner will not resist the correction of those in authority in the church but will submit to the process with a tender spirit. No process is perfect for no person is perfect, but that is not the issue when repenting of sin. The sinner gives up his right to determine his consequences because he agrees that the church is more important than his feelings. He will do whatever is necessary to maintain the testimony of the church. Restitution means an agreement to correct any misinformation that came from the lips of the sinner or any damage to the body caused by the actions of the sinner. Restitution means surrender to the leadership of the church and doing whatever is necessary to correct the wrongs done to others. The sinner is not in a position to determine those wrongs so he must submit to others who have a fuller perspective.

## RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jesus told a parable about a man with two sons. The father went to the first son and told him to work in the vineyard. The son refused but then changed his mind (repented) and went to work. The father went to the second son and told him the same thing. The second son told the father he would do it but didn't. Jesus then asked, *which of the two did the will of the Father?* Obviously, the first through repentance did what the father wanted (Mt. 21:28-31). God is pleased with the person who repents and does what God wants rather than the person who says the right words but never obeys.

God is interested in righteousness – in doing right. Any repentance that does not lead to right doing is a false repentance. John the Baptist made this principle very clear in his teaching. He taught the people that they needed to repent and *bear fruits in keeping with repentance* (Luke 3:8). The people naturally wanted to know what that meant in practical terms.

*And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:10-14)*

Righteousness is the fruit of repentance. John was teaching that in each situation a repentant person needs to determine how to live right before man and God. Repentance leads to a new pattern for life. The paradigm must change. Patterns of sin that have been ingrained for years must be rearranged. The soul must be reprogrammed for righteousness. Paul explains the doctrine of justification in Romans 6 as a death to sin (6:7). Initial sanctification begins with justification. We are freed from the obligation to obey sin as our master (6:14). We were slaves to sin, but now we are freed to become slaves to righteousness (6:17-18). Then he exhorts us to *offer ourselves as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification* (Rom. 6:19). The presentation of ourselves is an act we perform that leads to our growth in holiness. Consecration leads to sanctification. Slavery to right doing is the means of grace leading to our holiness. We will never experience progressive sanctification if we do not consciously work on reprogramming the sinful patterns of our lives that made us slaves to sin into new patterns that make us slaves to righteousness. This is the path to holiness.

Patterns of sin become so ingrained that we often don't even realize the triggers that subconsciously lead us down the path to sin. A man addicted to pornography unconsciously sets himself up for sin when he reacts to his wife's critical words as he leaves the house early for an appointment and just "happens" to drive past an adult bookstore with a little time to spare. The sin pattern has already been set in motion before the temptation surfaces. He is in trouble before he realizes he is in trouble. The only solution is to change the pattern from the beginning by staying and honestly dealing with the critical words rather than walking out in anger. He must also reprogram himself not to leave extra time for sin on the way and not to drive past the bookstore that tempts him to sin.

## SUMMARY

Repentance means:

- To accept responsibility for sin without seeking to explain it. To explain is to excuse behavior on some level and is not repentance. Repentance is never determined on a percentage scale (you 10% but me 90%). Whenever I hear someone say, "I know I'm not perfect, but she is mostly to blame in this matter" true repentance has not occurred. The prodigal son gave up explaining to his father why he had sinned. He accepted the blame for his sin without raising any mitigating circumstances. Just repent.
- To accept the consequences of sin as determined by those against whom we have sinned. When we repent, we renounce the right to determine what the consequences should be for

our sin. The prodigal son accepted whatever consequences his father would require even if it meant becoming a servant instead of a son. King David accepted whatever consequences God might require through His prophet Nathan. When we repent, we give up control over the process. We surrender.

- To provide restitution where necessary and possible. Restitution may involve actual payment for a wrong, or it may involve correcting false information made in the process of wronging others. Restitution may involve agreeing to live with the consequences that have been determined for us by those in authority over us. We might have to pay a debt to society, or we might have to live with the sorrow of altered relationships.
- To commit ourselves to changing the sinful patterns of behavior into patterns that lead to righteousness. Bad habits die hard, but they must be replaced by good habits through a process of behavior modification where we re-program our reactions and our decisions. The new pattern must be practiced – even if at first it seems artificial – until the new pattern becomes habitual like the old pattern. This process might take years of hard and sometimes painful work.

I have been a pastor for many years and have watched people struggle with repeating patterns of sin. Many achieve victory for a time and then fall back into the same or a similar sin as before. They are miserable about it but cannot seem to gain victory that lasts over their particular besetting sin. I have seen others change completely and never return to the same sinful patterns. I do not mean that they achieve perfection for they face new temptations and must learn to gain victory over sin in new areas of their lives. However, they do not succumb to the repeating sin pattern from which they repented.

Why? What makes the difference between the two scenarios? There is one common denominator in those who gain victory versus those who fail. It is repentance. Those who repeated the sinful pattern invariably were the ones who were quick to repent and quick to claim victory by grace. They never took the painful process of repentance seriously and often criticized those who attempted to encourage true repentance as being self-righteous Pharisees. I have seen people “repent” publicly with great tears at the front of the church in a moving display of remorse only to return to a similar sin a few years later. I have listened to people say to me, “I know this is wrong but God will forgive me” as they move ahead with sinful plans. I have heard people exult in great victory only to see them fall in deep defeat, destroyed by the same sin over which they claimed victory. This emphasis on easy, cheap grace is the one common denominator of all who doom themselves to repetitive sin patterns and fail to grow into new people changed by God’s grace.

The people who achieved lasting victory over a sin pattern in their lives are always the people who took repentance seriously. I have watched as people truly turned away from their sin and accepted the reality that they were not able to defeat that sin. They did not blame others nor did they explain the sin away. These “winners” did not accuse others of self-righteousness for holding them accountable but were grateful instead for the tough love administered to them. They chose to submit to a serious process of “killing” the spider in their lives and did not quickly grab grace to anesthetize guilt. No attempt was made to feel better quickly nor to “get back to normal

and put it all behind” them. I have seen such “winners” adopt a lifestyle change founded on a repentant attitude that pervaded their lives. God’s grace manifested through God’s people carried these winners to victory as they released their loads through repentance. I have often marveled at the people of God who have a remarkable ability to discern true repentance and support the repentant sinner with love (Gal. 6:1-3).

The antidote to repeating sin patterns in our lives is to take repentance very seriously. We will never appreciate the greatness of grace until we face the depth of sin. We will never experience the joy of grace until we accept the radical surgery of repentance. True repentance releases us from the chains that bind us one link at a time. Repentance is the only exit from the pit. It is the turning point in the cycle of sanctification. Release begins with repentance.

Diagnostic questions for the repentant:

1. Will I accept responsibility for my sins without seeking to explain them?
2. Will I accept responsibility for my sins without attempting to shift the blame?
3. Am I ready to accept the consequences for my sins?
4. Am I willing to provide restitution where necessary?
5. Am I willing to repent without making demands on the party I have wronged?



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<sup>1</sup> Here we see clearly the biblical distinction between initial or positional sanctification and progressive sanctification. We “died” indicates a definitive event that initiates our sanctification and establishes us as holy before God in Christ’s holiness. This event occurred simultaneously with regeneration and justification when we placed our faith in Christ’s payment for our sin. Yet sanctification is also an ongoing process that requires action on our part as we put to death the sinful nature we still must battle. The only way to win this battle is by the power of the Holy Spirit in a war that continues throughout our earthly lives (Rom. 8:13).

<sup>2</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1853, reprint edition 1967) 6:9.

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur Jr. *Mortification of Sin, MSJ* (v.5, #1, Spring, 1994), p.13.

<sup>4</sup> This verb is in the Aorist tense which has led many to suggest a once-for-all action but the aorist does not mean once-for-all action as many grammarians have demonstrated. The Aorist tense is undefined as to process and the context alone can determine the precise sense of the verb. Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 91 (1972), pp. 222-231; Charles R. Smith, “Errant Aorist Interpretations,” *Grace Theological Journal*, v.2, #2 (Fall 1981), pp. 205-227; D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 69-75; Ernest DeWitt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, Reprint of the third edition, 1976), pp. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> “In principle the Colossians had, in becoming Christians died with Christ (cf. 2:20; 3:3). Now they are charged to make this death to the old life real in everyday practice. ... The verb *Νεκρώσατε* (3:5), meaning literally ‘to make dead’ is very strong. It suggests that we are not simply to suppress or control evil acts and attitudes. We are to wipe them out, completely exterminate the old way of life. ‘Slay utterly’ may express its force. The form of the verb (aorist imperative) makes clear that that the action is to be undertaken decisively, with a sense of urgency. Both the meaning of the verb and the force of the tense suggest a vigorous, painful act of personal determination.” Curtis Vaughn, “Colossians” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 211.

<sup>6</sup> Earl and Sandy Wilson; Paul and Virginia Friesen; Larry and Nancy Paulson, *Restoring the Fallen: A Team Approach to Caring, Confronting and Reconciling* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, Friesen, and Paulson, *Restoring the Fallen*, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 156.

